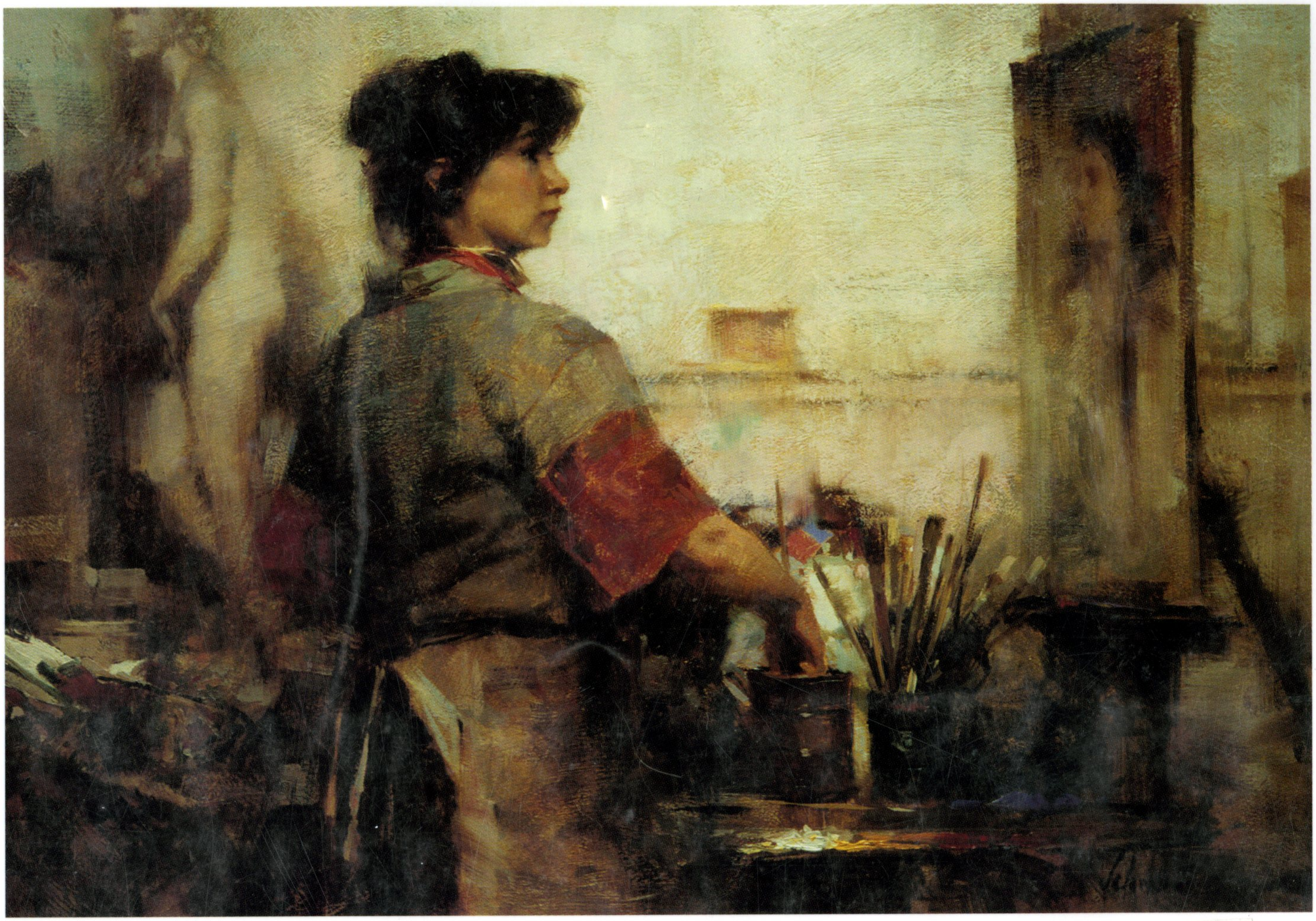
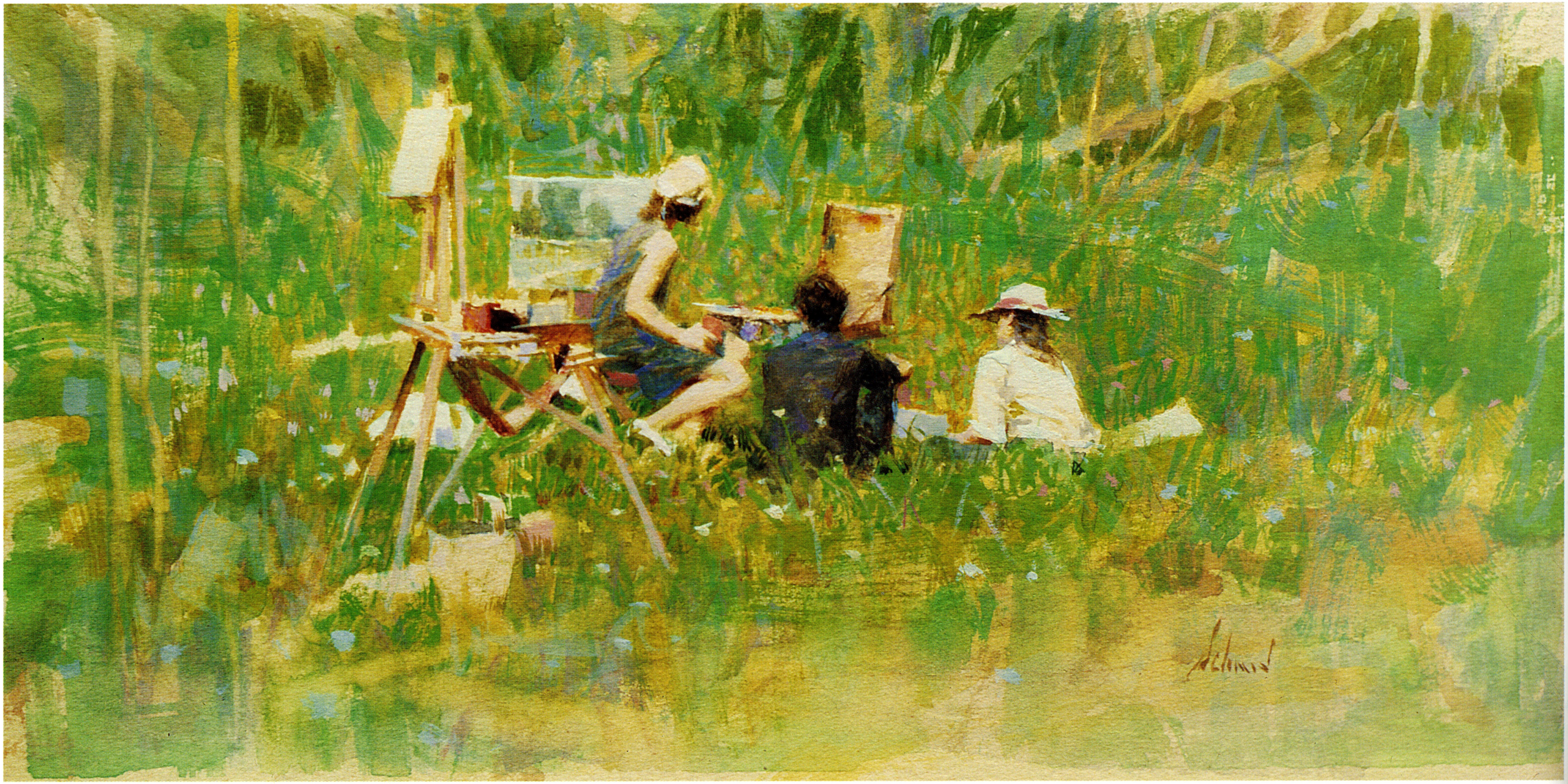
ALLA PRIMA

Everything I Know About Painting

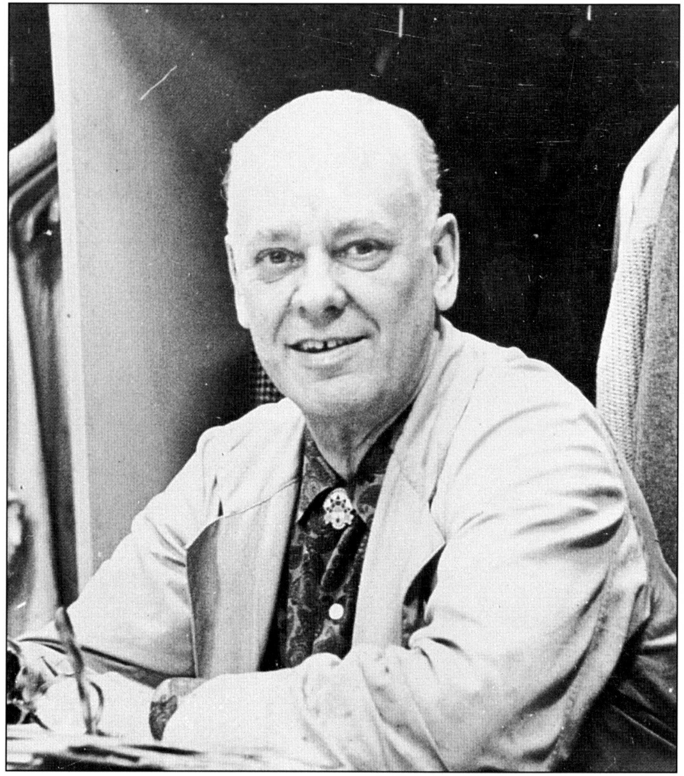


By RICHARD SCHMID



"DOOR COUNTY AFTERNOON" Gouache 5½″ × 11″

Shown here from left to right are Rose Frantzen, Scott Burdick, and Nancy Guzik during their landscape painting debut in 1987. We spent a week painting together on the tranquil Green Bay peninsula of Wisconsin. Pity I didn't show them from the front. After days of rain, Black flies, twisted ankles, sunburn, and my critiques, their expressions were quite interesting. All have since developed superb outdoor painting skills.



FOR BILL MOSBY

When I was young I had some truly gifted teachers. The most extraordinary of them was a man named William H. Mosby, and I had the good fortune of receiving a classical education in painting from him. "Bill" Mosby in turn received his primary training prior to World War II at the Belgian Royal Academy in Brussels, and later at the Superior Institute in Antwerp. His teachers were contemporaries of such luminaries as Monet, Degas, Zorn, Sargent, Sorolla, Mancini, Serov, and the rest of that group, along with the Naturalists, the early Abstractionists and other experimental painters. The pure skill which abounded in that generation was grounded on centuries of accumulated information—knowledge that by then had reached an astonishing level of sophistication. Mosby had a direct access to that world of art and he shared much of what he learned with me. In many respects, this is his book as much as mine.



"FALLEN PINE" Oil 12″ × 16″

Painted at Stove Prairie in the Rocky Mountain foothills in 1991. This is typical of the intimate landscape sketch I find so refreshing to do. It is actually a portrait of a tree, done with a minimum of emphasis on surrounding elements.

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"GRETCHEN SKETCHING" Oil 20″ × 30″

The young lady at the easel is my daughter Gretchen, painting with me during a trip to Battle Lake Minnesota in 1985—what could be more beautiful?

INTRODUCTION

This book is mostly about how I paint. I want people who look at my pictures to see what I see when I look at my subjects. At least that is my fond hope. I respectfully write with the assumption that your goal is similar—that you wish to be able to faithfully render what you see as a prerequisite to self-expression. Now it happens occasionally that a painting turns out well by accident or luck or sheer effort, but don't count on it. If you wish to make sure your painting will succeed, a minimum of three things must come from you—*and only you*. The first thing is knowing why you want to paint your subject, the second is an analytical grasp of what you see, and the third is the skill to control the process of painting. These three ideas underlie everything that I share with you here.

I prefer to work from life, so there is much about "Direct painting" throughout this book. Direct painting (also called *alla prima* or *au premier coup*) means painting from life, usually in one session. I believe it to be the ultimate in representational art because it is about real experience and demands the highest level of skill. Also, I write mostly from the standpoint of an oil painter. While I enjoy other mediums, I work mostly in oils and naturally express myself in those terms, but my message should make sense regardless of the materials that you use. I also feel that changing my references from one medium to another would be confusing. In any case, the same visual elements (shapes of color or value and edges) are involved. The only difference is in the rendering.

I have tried to avoid rules of any kind. If some of my comments sound like rules, I apologize. Think of them as emphatic suggestions—painting should be a liberating experience, not an ordeal filled with dos and don'ts. Please remember that what I offer is merely what I have learned, and certainly not the last word on how to paint. I give you ideas and procedures that work, but that does not mean that my methods, or any of the methods of the great masters, for that matter, are the sole solutions, or the best.

You might come across what seem to be contradictions in my comments. For example, the need for control coupled with flexibility—or looseness of brushing joined with exactness of drawing. Such opposites, as you will discover, are complementary rather than contradictory. It is in the gray areas of pure choice, where there is no obvious "best" way that the true technical dilemma lies. So much in art is a matter of impulse and judgment—when having the savvy and smarts to break the rules imaginatively yet convincingly makes all the difference. We artists work in a realm where instinct and emotion and intelligence mingle bewilderingly, and what works in one case may not always work in another. The foundations however, of sound drawing, values, edges, and color, remain constant. You need a very good reason to deliberately mess with them.

There is some repetition here as well, which is unavoidable because so much in painting involves overlapping ideas. Squinting down, for example, is essential for making judgments about edges, but it is also vital in determining values. Other ideas are reiterated on purpose because I consider them to be crucial—principles of accuracy and control, for example, and knowing where you want to go with your painting.

My formal training under William Mosby involved working from life exclusively, using at first the conceptual and technical methods of the Direct painters—the Flemish, Dutch, and Spanish masters, and then the late nineteenth century Italian, French, Slavic, Scandinavian, and American painters. The aim was not to imitate their styles, but to understand how they thought, what their problems were, and how they approached them. When I faced my own challenges, fidelity to my subjects at the moment of painting was always the goal. I was disciplined to analyze what I saw and render it faithfully. The result was a familiarity with paint that seems like second nature to me now.

The richness of my experience with Bill is hard to overstate. As the years have gone by, I have come to realize the magnitude of what I received. I haven't the slightest idea of why I got it, but I did, and I have always felt I was a custodian of this knowledge rather than its owner. Painting has been my dearest friend for almost fifty years now. My skills and the freedom to use them are the most precious gifts I have. They opened up a world that few others ever have the opportunity of experiencing. I hope that this book will help open the door to that world for you as well. Godspeed.

Richard Schmid
Stove Prairie, Colorado 1998

CHAPTER ONE—GOOD IDEAS AND FREE ADVICE

What could be more wonderful than the life of a painter? Beyond the usual necessities of life, we live out our days needing nothing more than a box of paints, some brushes, and something to paint on. We have no boss, employees, or financial backers. We don't require a performance hall, a publisher, a film studio, a foundry, or for that matter, even a gallery. All we really need is a continual passion for what we are doing, and a reasonable amount of evidence along the way that we are accomplishing something worthwhile. For most of us, that means at least painting skillfully enough to have satisfying results, perhaps even achieving a level of virtuosity.

Whether you are a professional, a student, or you paint just for enjoyment, you ought to be serious about it, at least while you are painting. *ALWAYS* give it your best shot. Have a warm respect for your art and cherish your affection for it. Never demean your efforts because you think you're not in a class with Rembrandt. Paint the things you passionately respond to, and use *any* means necessary to make your work come out the way you intend. (That's what Rembrandt did.) Like other painters, I sometimes shudder when I see my early work, but I was trying my best at the time. Today I am certainly aware of the shortfalls in my current paintings. (*Shortfalls* is hogwash for outright bungling.) I remind myself, however, that if I got it right every time, there would be little sense of accomplishment.

TALENT

Don't bother about whether or not you have it. Just assume that you do, and then forget about it. Talent is a word we use *after* someone has become accomplished. There is no way to detect it before the fact, or when someone is still grappling with the learning process. It is impossible to predict when or if mastery will click into place. Besides, the thing we label as talent is not a single ability. It is a complex mixture of motive, curiosity, receptivity, intelligence, sensitivity, good teaching, perseverance, timing, sheer luck, and countless other things. If any part of it is genetic, God-given, the result of astrological fiddle-faddle, fate, or destiny, that part is not the sole determining factor. All the other ingredients must be present in the right combination—and no one knows the exact recipe. Therefore Dear Reader, don't waste time worrying if you are talented—and don't blame any failures on the lack of it—that is *really* a cop-out.

Artistic skill—the ability to draw well and make paint behave—is not a natural endowment like big blue eyes or great legs. Nor is it a special knack you simply have or do not have, like a "green thumb," a "natural sense of rhythm," or "surgeon's hands." (Those things are nonsense too.) Neither does it matter whether your parents, grandparents, or any of your ancestors were artists—except insofar as they may have motivated you, taught you, or served as role models. You can learn the skills required for painting in the same way that you can learn anything else you are strongly drawn to. I don't mean to understate the difficulties, however. The great painters devoted their lives to their art, often to the point of total obsession. Serious painting is not something that can be learned casually. You must be willing to sacrifice many other things.



"CHRISS" Gouache on Gesso Panel 13″ × 18″

Strictly speaking, this is a watercolor with opaque white added here and there in the light areas. I find that a work done solely with actual gouache pigments lacks the deep transparency of watercolor in the darks. The effect here is nearly identical to egg tempera, but without the eggs. I prefer to eat them.

LEARNING

Don't be afraid to learn. The idea of having an aversion to learning may sound silly, but in some quarters it is a definite no-no. A surprising number of otherwise intelligent people believe that learning about painting will inhibit them artistically—that *spontaneity* alone matters. The theory is that the path to meaningful art somehow arises naturally from deep within the human spirit, and any influence from the outside (established knowledge) will somehow contaminate the purity of the interior process. All that is necessary is to "let go," and a force from within will manage things.

I've always had trouble with that. Bach and Shakespeare and Michelangelo were all fine craftsmen who built upon what came before, and *they* weren't stupid. Even Mozart occasionally listened to his father. I believe that if you are going to master a skill and stimulate new achievements, it is not wise to ignore what is already known—above all, technical information. Painting has occupied some of the greatest minds in history, so why not yours too? You will never run out of fascinating things to study. Art is a living language with infinite possibilities awaiting. Learn everything you can about it, add your own insights, and use what you need. I believe that while you are in a learning mode (which should be most of the time), you should suspend your "arty" sensitivities. Save those for when you are dreaming up your next masterpiece. Focus on the fascination of problem solving, or absorbing the lessons of your successes.

FAILURE

Profit from your failed paintings. Each one is sending you a message about what you may be doing wrong. Find out what it is, *and don't do it again*. I regard my disasters as invitations to learn more. They raise my hackles and dare me. My blunders tell me something technical (and therefore valuable) about what I do wrong. I see the mistakes I make for what they are—ordinary errors—and nothing more. In the same way, when *you* make mistakes they do not reflect upon you as a person, nor on your intelligence, and certainly not on your artistic attributes. Mistakes are part of being human. So what?

YOUR CODE

Underlying all your choices, particularly subject matter and the way you represent it, should be your own personal scruples, the standards and rules that you voluntarily set for yourself, and which you may change or abandon whenever you choose—without explanation to anyone. Your rules should arise out of your passions and your experience with what works for you. Don't take advice unless you understand it and it is useful to you. However, don't reject difficult ideas simply because you fail to grasp them immediately. Put them on hold until you do, then decide. Many things in painting become clear only after considerable experience, and that takes time.

Without mindless imitation, don't be shy about stealing good ideas. All artists have done that. It is why we have a vast body of cumulative knowledge from which to draw. Plagiarism is passing off someone's work as yours, but learning from their knowledge is an extension of their achievement. The caveat is that if you wish to study the works of another artist, make sure that he or she is competent. Watch out especially for the shortcomings of famous artists. Not everything they did was great art. They too had their bad days.

VIGILANCE

No matter how skillful you become, painting never gets easy. Of course, once you really get the fundamentals under your belt, you will no longer, as they say, crank out the turkeys. However, if you expect masterpieces to effortlessly emerge from then on, you will be disappointed. The reason why painting remains so demanding is because as you improve, your results will grow more rewarding, which will push you to increase your skill. That, in turn, will carry with it enriched insights and an urge to pursue greater challenges requiring still greater mastery, and so on. It is not the law of diminishing returns operating here, because the returns always increase. It is the carrot and stick routine—you can never quite catch up because the demands of painting will always remain greater than your expertise.

CONFIDENCE

Self-doubt is utterly crippling to painters. Nothing will mess up our efforts more effectively than believing that we lack "what it takes." Well, no one knows what it takes, so how could anyone possibly know if they don't have it? They can't and you can't. Therefore, always give yourself the benefit of the doubt. Have confidence in the abilities that you already do have. After all, some of what is required to do a decent job of painting involves nothing more than the good sense you learned in grammar school, plus some other quite ordinary capabilities that are *not* strictly technical. In fact, the simple act of writing your name requires far more manual dexterity than anything needed in painting. The critical skills are mostly mental—disciplined perception, problem solving, knowledge of the visual elements, and an understanding of painting materials and tools.

Also, we painters do not need special physical attributes as dancers or athletes do. (Or the brute strength of sculptors.) We can be any size or shape or sex or race or age, and we don't have to endure the physical training that musicians and most performers require. We don't even have to be fully sane. Physically, we need only our brains and eyes and reasonably steady hands. Lest we think otherwise—that we need something more—let us remember that some handicapped painters do it with a brush between their teeth or toes. Even Renoir did not give up when he was crippled with arthritis, but chose to go on painting with a brush lashed to his fingers.

EN GARDE!

Stay alert and sharp when you work. Make sure your mind is fully engaged. Serious painting is not recreation or therapy or hell raising. It is intense creative work, even though it may have some or all of those other benefits. It is a visual language, and if you intend to say something articulate and worthwhile, you must be fully conscious. Stay healthy and eat well if you can—that romantic stuff about being a starving artist is absurd. It is much better to suffer with a full stomach—but skip the wine or martinis. You need clear thinking to paint. Be good to yourself—take frequent breaks from time to time. Give your mind a rest so you stay fresh throughout the painting. Your work, after all, reflects you and your state of mind more than it reflects *anything* else. How many pictures have you seen that give out a message of fatigue or boredom or confusion or frustration?



It was so cold the day I painted this that I could barely grip my brushes. (I can never work well wearing gloves). Perhaps it was a good thing, because I was forced to work carefully, so as not to consume time with mistakes. For the same reason, I had to work simply as well (avoiding excessive detail). I have since taken to wearing gloves with cut off finger tips, or mittens with holes in their ends. Both work quite well, but I had none with me at the time. A good stiff brandy or Schnapps to relieve the cold, however, is *not* a very good idea. Alcohol feels quite nice for a while, but I inevitably end up painting stupidly. Nancy was smart. She just watched me from the cozy warmth of our car.

"MINNESOTA HAY CRIB"
Oil 16″ × 12″

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Don't go overboard with exotic or complex ways to paint. Stick to simple solutions unless there is a good reason to do otherwise. Let your viewers first see *what* you are trying to express—hit them with your message—then let them notice *how* you expressed it. (I think it is more decorous in that order.)

Don't wish for "secrets" of the Masters either. There are none worth fooling with. They had no special mediums or paints, nor special brushes that made their work great. (Our materials are unquestionably better than any they had.) Their only secret was what they knew—plus the good sense to slam into their problem head on. They dealt with painting in the most direct way they could think of. That's one reason why they are Masters.

Beware of the lure of ostentatious techniques too. Flashy tricks will not make your point stronger. It is what you are trying to convey with paint that counts, and an easily understood rendering is always the strongest. Remember that painting is not a performing art, nor a sport, nor a contest to see who can get the most attention. Painting, I repeat, is a *language*. If the content of your work imparts something thoughtful, it will eventually be noticed. Don't be crushed if it doesn't happen right away. If you want to be famous, get into politics, or crime, or show business, or sports. If you paint just to get rich, shame on you. If you paint because you must do it or die, you are my kind of painter, read on!

BEDROCK

Painting by its very nature is a discretionary act, and its latitude for expression is boundless. Even within the confines of representational painting, there is no limit to the ways a subject can be rendered and still look unmistakably authentic. That is possible because of the dichotomy of human experience—the fact that all of us agree on much of what reality looks like (if we didn't we couldn't communicate), but we also experience reality in purely personal terms (which is why witnesses differ about the same event). Art lets us mingle these simultaneous yet seemingly incompatible aspects of experience in almost magical ways. When we are bursting with some wordless experience, Art is our voice, the song of the heart.

As painters, however, we must always remember that our precious poetic visions and spiritual insights will remain forever locked within us until we can boil them down to a complex arrangement of a few hundred or possibly even thousands of brushstrokes. Each of those strokes has four main characteristics—color, value, edges and drawing. Those are the *only* things that get onto our canvases—Art happens in the mind of the person seeing them.

FINISHING

When is a painting finished? That is indeed the question! Some paintings are finished after only a few brushstrokes, others seem to take forever. The strength and clarity of the picture you envision at the start will tell you when you are done. You are finished when you have said what you wish to say, when nothing added can make it better. The last question you must ask before signing a work should be this—does it look like what you want it to look like? If it doesn't, you must ask yourself if you *know* what you want it to look like—before you go back to find out what went wrong.

ABOUT THE PROCESS

When you are trying to learn, treat each painting session as a time to solve a specific problem. Set a limited goal—something you can do, *as you intend to do it*, in the time available, and under the circumstances in which you must work. This normally involves a compromise between everything you would *like* to do, and what is realistically possible. Remember that *you* must set the boundaries of what to paint (unless you are working under a teacher).

If something is visible, stays reasonably still, and is not in itself a blindingly bright source of light, it can be painted! If the kids are coming home in ten minutes and the dog just threw up on the bedroom rug, don't even think about starting anything serious. More than just your urge to paint is required. The conditions must be right, your subject must be stable, the light must be adequate, and you must be free to work.

Once you have decided what it is about your subject that you wish to paint, ignore the rest of what you see. Painting is not a challenge to render everything in sight. What matters both technically and artistically is the *quality* of what you do, not how much you can cram onto a canvas. A painting finished from edge to edge but poorly done is a waste of paint. An incomplete sketch superbly executed is power.

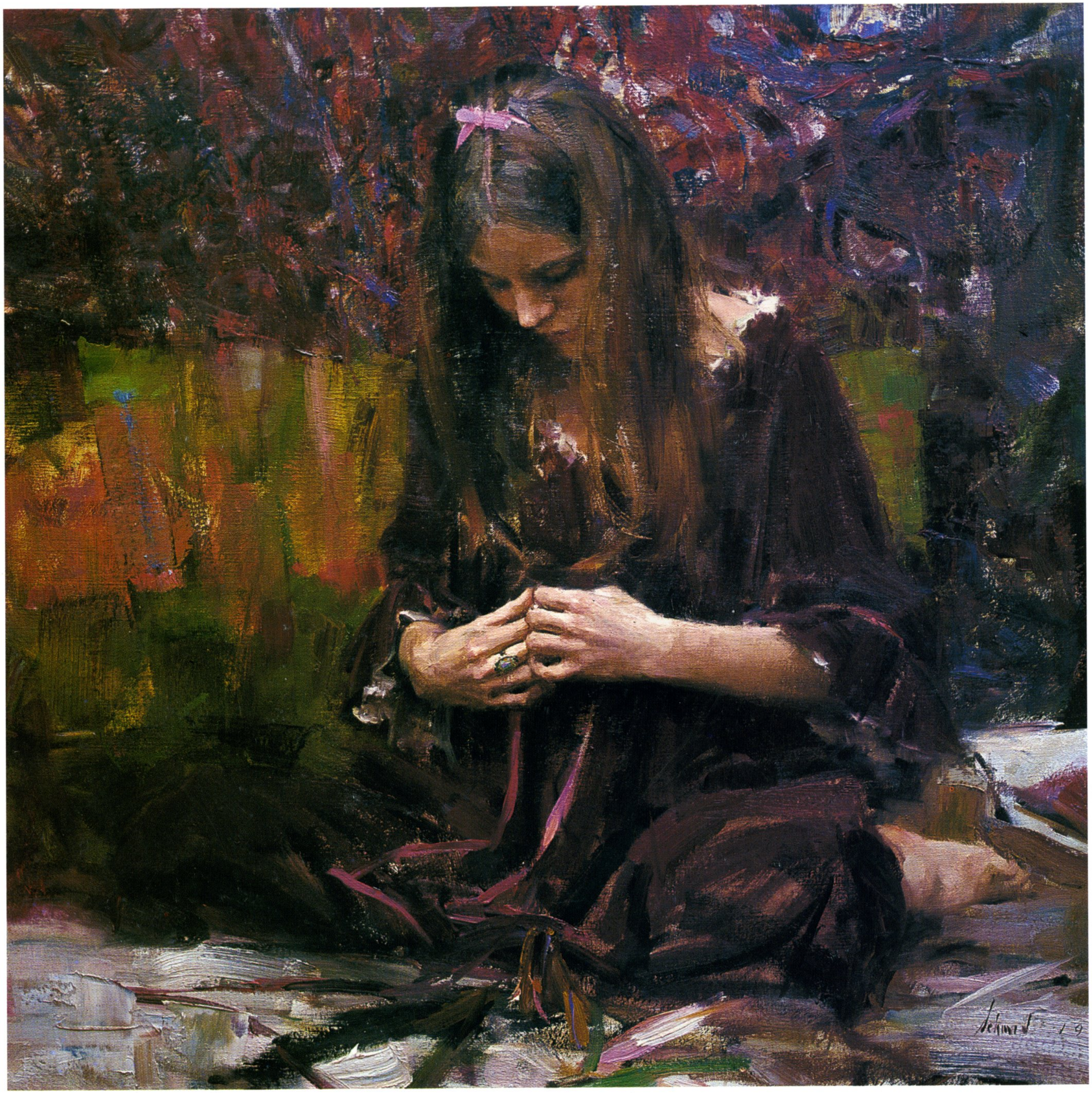
Once you start, *think about what you are doing!* Work with deliberate intent, as if you were executing a perfect premeditated crime. Stay in control. Work so that you know what needs to be done and where you are going with your painting (and consequently, when to stop). There is no contradiction between being in control and giving free rein to your energy (ask any jockey). It is a matter of doing things in the right order. *First* you must have the skills to control your actions, *then* you can cut loose and have fun. Doing it in reverse doesn't work. If you relax your grip without understanding what you are doing, you are in for trouble. Throw paint on with a shovel if that makes you happy (not recommended), but make sure it lands in the right spot.

CONTROL

However you choose to paint, get it accurate in every *necessary* respect. That does not mean "tight" or detailed. You can work in a splendidly loose and simple way and still be exact. Looseness is not a frivolous departure from control, quite the opposite. It arises from the freedom which comes with *superb* control. Any athlete or accomplished performer will confirm that. That's how pros and virtuosi are able to make their wonders seem so effortless. *Therefore, looseness should describe how a painting looks, not how it is done.*

Don't assume anything when you paint. Measure for every critical stroke you place on the canvas, then measure it again against something already on your canvas that you are sure is correct. Hang a big sign in a conspicuous place in your studio with the following words:

Never knowingly leave anything wrong on your canvas.



This painting offered interesting problems involving a variety of textures such as velvet, satin, hair, skin, etc. In 1971, when this was done, I was painting generally more thickly than I do now, relying on the blending of colors and dry brushing to achieve my edges (and appropriate edges are the key to creating the illusion of texture.) Since then, I have become more aware of the role of contrasting opacity with transparency to enhance textural effects. Integrating my paint thickness with suitable edges gives me astonishingly realistic results.

"VELVET ROBE"
Oil Detail of 30″ × 36″ original

"WRONG?"

What do I mean by wrong? *Wrong is anything on my canvas that doesn't look like what I intend it to look like.* I don't mean to suggest that wrong means any deviation from a strictly literal rendering of my subject. On the contrary, wrong as I am using it here means deviation from my perception of a subject or what I wish to have in my picture. Whenever you put something on your painting that bothers you or doesn't look true, do not leave it there and go on to something else thinking it doesn't matter. It *does* matter. It is the same as deliberately leaving ungrammatical words in writing. Why do it?

I try not to do it, and it bothers me when I let it happen. (It doesn't happen by itself.) All my life I have been trying to create images that you and everyone will recognize as "real," but at the same time doing so in such a way that you will see what I alone experience. "Wrong" then, for me, is whenever I put something on my canvas that isn't the way I see things (because I don't want you to get the wrong idea). Each finishing stroke that I do is like a note in music or a word in a sentence. If I am at a concert, for example, and the soloist keeps hitting wrong notes, or the author I'm reading can't spell or punctuate, those blunders wreck everything. It is exactly the same with this kind of painting. My brushstrokes *are* my words and notes. Each one is there for a reason, and for me it must be what I intend. If it is wrong, it will cause all sorts of mischief.

Although they are sometimes difficult to pinpoint, colors that don't belong or things badly drawn will exert a disturbing influence until they are corrected. Why? Because all elements in my picture are *interrelated*. Each brushstroke and color shape is dependent on every other one for their correctness. The structure that I create is as fragile and vulnerable as a house of cards until I am finished. By deliberately (or otherwise) allowing something significantly wrong to remain, I frustrate my subsequent attempts to make accurate judgments. I also undermine my ability to assess what sound work I have already done. Ignored mistakes make my good work look bad, and I don't want that. Do you?

PRELIMINARIES

We know that paintings can't happen magically all at once. They must be done stroke by stroke, and much of what is done in the initial stages is not intended to be seen in the finished work. Much of what goes on at the start is preparatory work and will not make sense or look "right" until the final brushwork is laid over it. This is usually referred to as "underpainting," and it is necessary to some degree in most painting. My experience permits me to allow for this *intentional* inexactness without being thrown off.

For my needs in painting from life, the preliminary lines and colors that go on at the start normally serve as color and compositional indications—the overall design of the pictorial elements. They may simply outline the position of the main subject or indicate the color harmony that I see. The majority of my paintings (and most other artists) involve some groundwork of this sort (usually very sketchy) to prepare the way. Often my first marks serve merely to visualize different ideas without making an immediate commitment. However, once I have established where the major elements of my subject will be placed within the picture area, there is then no reason to continue in a sketchy way. I switch my thinking then toward accurate work.

SPEED

Slow down for the hard parts. Slow down for the easy parts too. Their easiness can be deceptive. Try to develop an enjoyable steady pace as you work. Painting is not a race. Savor what you are doing. (You wouldn't gobble down a gourmet dinner.) Work only as fast as accuracy will allow. Speed will come with experience. Besides, it is necessary only when the subject is changing fast, and even then a slow cool assessment of what is occurring, and careful paint application, are better than trying to frantically capture movement as it is happening.

Active movement within a subject most often occurs in landscape painting—partly cloudy days with sunlight constantly appearing and disappearing is particularly difficult to manage. Usually I choose not to paint on such days, but if I have started a painting in a certain light condition and things start changing, I simply wait out the periods when the light is not as it was when I began. However, if I have started in bright sunlight, for example, and it clouds over for the rest of the day, I start over. If I lose time because of corrections or other problems, I resist the temptation to paint faster. If I hurry to catch up, I usually make more mistakes, lose even more time, and I panic. When that happens, my work is doomed.

THE MAIN DISH

Once you are into the serious stuff—past the opening shots—and you know where you want to put everything, don't make random strokes anymore. They amount to aimless daubing in the vain hope of somehow accidentally making the right one. It is pure speculation, and the law of averages is overwhelmingly against you. Also, avoid getting involved in what is called "licking"—brushing in the same area over and over while you decide what to do next.[1] It is the equivalent of daydreaming, a substitute for thinking.

Many painters do this unconsciously. If you have painted in a group, you have probably noticed the person with a dazed expression locked into working on one small area of a painting, making the same brushmark over and over. If *you* are ever that person (and we all have been), break the spell. Step back and take a fresh look at where you are. Have a clear idea of why you are putting your brush to the canvas. Know exactly what line or color or edge you need before you jump back in.

As a special favor to me, resolve that you will not just casually glance at your subject and put down something to see if it looks *OK*. Your painting should have a minimum of trial and error. *Verify* what you are seeing on the subject for its shape, value, length, thickness, color, edges, and so on—*then* place your brushstroke and step back to check it again against the subject.[2] Make a critical evaluation, and either leave it alone or modify it as necessary, then go on. Stepping back frequently and using a mirror are excellent ways to check for correctness.

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1 "Licking" also refers to the excessive blending and smoothing of the paint surface. It was a favorite trick of the Salon painters of the last century. They even invented special brushes and mediums to do the job, and they tried to outdo one another in the glassy smoothness of their canvas surfaces. Most of it was boring stuff that reflected a preoccupation with how cleverly things were painted rather that *what* was being painted—and it cracked a lot.

2 Remember the carpenter's rule: Measure everything *twice.*



"APACHE TRAIL" (Arizona) Oil 18″ × 24″

In spite of its size, Apache Trail (painted in the Tonto National Forest in 1988) was done rather quickly in order to capture a fleeting effect of light. The entire bottom half of the painting is a combination of turpentine washes and dry brushing. Dry brush strokes can also be seen in the clouds to the right and left of center, though they were applied into impasto white pigment.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

Suppose I am working from life, I'm all fired up with a great start, I can see what I want in my mind, I know where I'm going—and Dear God, my painting starts to come apart. If I can't see why immediately, I have a number of choices:

1. I can give up. (Good for a painting that was a bad idea to begin with.)
2. I can put it away in the closet and hope that the paint fairy makes it look better in a week. (You never can tell.)
3. I can guess at the problem and try some optimistic dabbing at random. (Dumb.)
4. I can try faking it. (Which makes it worse.)
5. I can try altering the subject to fit my painting. This is possible under some circumstances with a setup such as a still life or a model's position, but the options are few and it smacks of cheating.
6. I can get out an art book to see how one of the masters handled a similar problem—not a bad idea but no guarantee of an answer. Their subjects and lighting never seem to be precisely the same as mine, and in any case their paintings do not tell me about their struggle. I only see the distilled result of their success.
7. This is the one that works!—***a process of elimination***.

By narrowing my search for causes I can always find the problem. Experience tells me that technical difficulties occur in only *three* areas—in the *subject*, the *circumstances*, or in *me*. My painting is never to blame. (As suggested in the familiar lament: "My painting just isn't working!") Why? Because my painting does not paint itself. I paint it! If I can't find the cause of a problem in my subject with things like movement, change of light, drooping flowers, the model falling asleep, or whatever, and I can't find fault with my working environment—wind, rain, insects, bad materials, crowds, noise, the cat, or any other disturbances—then I have to look at myself or the way I am painting.

If I am reasonably warm and dry, awake, not hungry, and I don't have to go to the bathroom, then the problem *MUST* therefore be in what I am *DOING*!—so now I know what to look for!

The next question is what *exactly* am I doing wrong? For the answer to that, the process of elimination must continue. I already know that there are only *TWO* possible errors in working from life. (Remember that.) To put it neatly they are:

1. **Painting something that is *not* there in a subject.**

2. ***Not* painting something essential that *is* there.**

I also know that those two errors can only occur within one or more of the four visible elements: Color, Values, Drawing, or Edges (or some combination of those).

AND NOWHERE ELSE.

Now I'm getting somewhere! I have brought things down to useful questions such as—in which of these four elements am I not seeing correctly? Am I departing from what I am seeing by putting in colors or values that aren't there? Am I ignoring something essential? Perhaps I am not paying attention to the edges or drawing that are necessary for my painting to match my subject. With questions like these I can scrutinize my painting carefully in each of the four areas, and *eliminate* from consideration the ones I got right. What remains will be the problem. (Quite so, Holmes!) Thus—if my color and values check out OK, and the drawing is good, then chances are I have an *edge* problem, and I will only have to change some of them to be back in business.

It isn't always that easy. A painting is an interrelated system, and errors often happen in combination. A color mistake will frequently involve an error in value as well. Likewise, poor drawing invariably contains flawed edges, so you must be alert for more than one thing happening. Despite these minor complications, this is still the best way I know of to get out of trouble. The process of elimination is rational and methodical. It will get you into a problem-solving frame of mind and away from the frustration of an aimless struggle.

WHAT NOT TO DO

The last thing I would do if a painting is not turning out is to blame my talent, or fate, or use futile abstractions to define the weakness or flaws. Such responses are useless. I hear painters say that their painting doesn't have the *feeling* they want, or it doesn't *sing,* or doesn't have *passion*, or *inner fire*, or *excitement.* They may complain that it lacks *authority*, or *sensitivity*, or the color is *dead*, or the whole thing just isn't *working*. Frequently painters turn upon themselves with "I'll never get the hang of color," or "I always mess up the drawing," or "I just can't do people," (or trees or water, etc.), and so on.

For me, sentiments like these merely describe my feelings rather than anything tangible or technically useful about why I think I might have botched things. Expressions such as those above cannot help solving a problem beyond acknowledging that I might have one, and that I am unhappy. (The poor-dear-me syndrome.) I can complain until doomsday, but complaining will not help. Qualities such as excitement, inner fire, and soul do not come in paint tubes, nor do they emerge from my brush. They only materialize when I use my skill to convert my fervor into bits of color, the way a pianist conveys emotion through appropriate pressures on piano keys. (And it takes the same amount of practice.)

If I am going to zap my problem, I must translate my frustrations into clear-cut technical terms. For example, if I think my color is not "vibrant" or "authentic," I have to ask myself what those adjectives denote. Invariably I get around to realizing that what I really mean is that my color isn't "clean." *That* turns out to mean that I am allowing complementary colors to intermix too much, creating mud,[3] and I'm also probably holding back with the true values. As for lack of "authenticity," that just means I was too lazy to match the colors to the subject. *Now* I have something I can get my teeth into!

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3 "Muddy" color, on further analysis, always turns out to be a color that is an inappropriate temperature—a too-cool color within a warm shadow, for example.



"MY FRIEND JOHN" Oil 16″ × 20″

When I am able to reduce a problem to a technical description, the solution pops right up. Recognizing that I need more orange or yellow (or whatever) in a mixture will yield a result. Just saying that a color is "wishy-washy" will not. On the other hand if nothing works, I may just be having a bad day.

To wrap this up, here is a little check list (by no means complete) of common mistakes and difficulties:

Careless drawing (not measuring).

Too many sharp edges.

Trying to paint *things* instead of color shapes.

Painting more values than are necessary.

Incorrect temperature changes.

Inventing impossible color.

Miserly paint (too little).

Unsuitable brushes.

Poorly stretched canvas.

Painting over life-size without a good reason.

Allowing too little time.

Working too close, not stepping back to view your work.

Overworking what should be left alone.

Working from inadequate photos.

Poor working light.

Not squinting for values and edges.

Too many highlights.

Painting shadows too light.

Muddy (wrong temperature) color.

"Pushing" bright colors arbitrarily.

Inappropriate paint thickness.

Excessively-thinned paint.

Cheap canvas, very absorbent canvas.

Painting too fast.

Painting very small without proper brushes.

Aimless brushstrokes.

Faking it.

Showing off.

Working from photos taken by others.

Excessive glare on the canvas.



"LYNDEN BARNS" (Washington State) Oil 12″ × 16″

Changing conditions in the subject or movement of a model.

Deficient palette—poor selection of pigments.

Trying to paint what is not possible to paint.

Timidity and lack of confidence—fear of making a mistake.

Painting under excessive pressure or distraction.

Wobbly easel.

Not cleaning palette and brushes while working.

Confusion—trying to do everything at once.

Trying to paint too much, especially detail.

Trying to paint what you don't want to paint.

Aside from the above, painting is as they say—*duck soup!*

Nancy and I have a little rule: when we travel, we must pose for one another for a half-hour every day, no matter what. I did this little sketch of her (in twenty minutes) as she was waking up one bright morning in our bed and breakfast—the same English estate where she posed while having breakfast. (See page 155.)



"YORKSHIRE MORNING"
Oil 6″ × 10″



"SAPPHIRE" Oil 16″ × 21″

CHAPTER TWO—DIRECT PAINTING

A BIT OF HISTORY

Looking back in time, I find it hard to imagine the average citizen of Pre-Renaissance Europe relating to very much in paintings the way we respond to our art today.[1] For one thing, the notion of art as a vehicle of self-expression had not yet appeared. Subject matter was largely confined to Biblical episodes, allegory, mythology, and glitzy tableaus of powerful people. Moreover, the ways such things were depicted were far removed from an ordinary person's experience.

If you trace the development of imagery used in Western European Art (our dominant roots), you will notice that elements in pictures did not begin to look "natural"—with authentic looking colors acting in light and shadow the way you and I see everyday things—until the early seventeenth century. That was not very long ago. Prior to 1600, we seldom find a painter even attempting a naturalistic depiction of what human beings actually saw. Painting techniques were highly stylized, with lights and shadows serving only to model the forms. Colors were used as flat tints, and nothing looked like what we today would call "real."

While there had to be some awareness among early painters about the role of light in the visual field, there was little serious headway in dealing with it until an astute Italian named Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and his colleagues started fooling around with something called *Chiaroscuro* (high contrast light and shadow). Mike's work in trying to paint dramatic light effects provoked a major revolution in visual perception.

Because his use of light as a distinct pictorial element was a new concept, it was slow to catch on. It was quite a lot to swallow for painters who had thought only in terms of physical form. Even when the use of light and shadow in painting did catch on later, it took many generations before things like shadows were understood well enough to be painted with a look of naturalness. The concept of light temperature was also slow in coming.

The difficulty with light as a determining factor was that it went against the traditional common sense notion that things simply "look like what they are," and that they sit out there in empty space. Artists were certainly aware of light, but (judging from their paintings) light served only as a source of illumination and did not affect the appearance of an object. A horse still looked like a horse no matter what the direction or color or brightness of the light on it. Well, it was hard to argue with that (and probably risky).

The traditionalists of the day must have been appalled at the very thought of *Chiaroscuro*. After all, the new idea threatened the preeminence, not to mention the validity, of what was unquestionably great art (theirs). The standard way of doing things had always worked well for everyone, and also paid the bills. Caravaggio's introduction of light rather than form as the primary ingredient in the visual field must have shaken the art world. Why? One reason was that light fluctuates, and that brought painting into an area of unpredictability—a very disagreeable notion to Renaissance minds accustomed to tidy order.

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1 Turning that around, a person from that period viewing one of our contemporary painting exhibitions might think we had lost our senses.

The standard thinking of the painters then (as now sometimes) was this—when you viewed your subject as a distinct *thing* rather than as a pattern of visual shapes, you had to paint what you *knew* about it—what else was there to go by? Naturally then, the more you knew about what you were painting, the better it turned out. However, painting *things* meant that a lot had to be memorized because there are a lot of things in the world, far too many to learn them all, and so they specialized. To this day the masters of those times can be recognized as much by the narrow range of their subjects as by their superb styles.

THE DAWNING

They did their best, and their best was breathtaking. Something however, possibly the dreariness of all that memorizing must have gotten to some of them, particularly the Dutch, Spanish, and a few others, because they gradually eased into simply painting what they *saw.* They were the first to paint the *appearance* of things rather than merely what they *knew* about them. In the process they presented us with the stunning gift of their new insights. Instead of trying to depict subjects only according to their external forms, those artists began to concentrate on capturing the effects of light that made them visible. It was an effort which, fortunately for us, turned out to be one of the most liberating discoveries in the history of art.

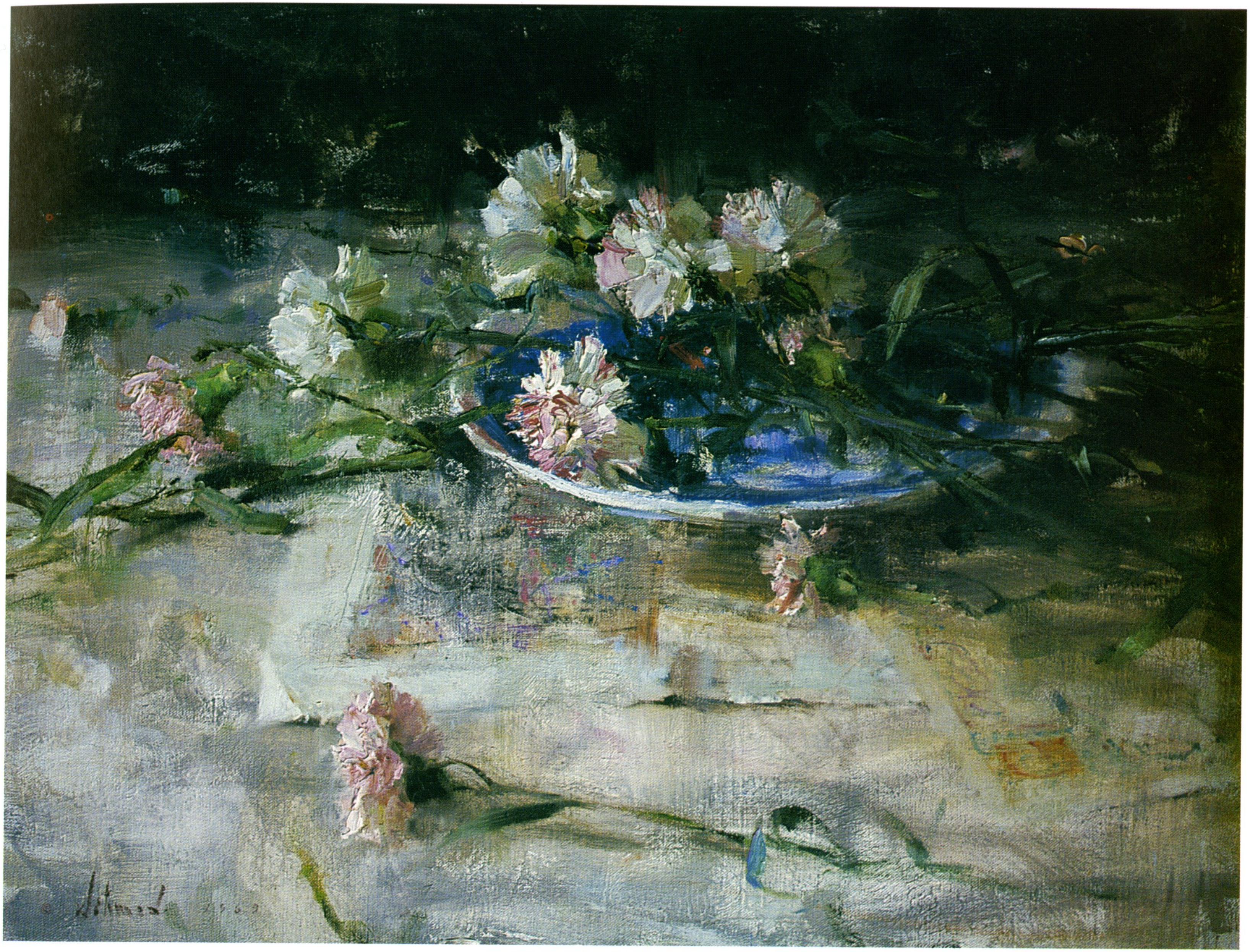
I must mention here that one other significant breakthrough preceded Direct painting. I refer to the development of linear perspective, which also occurred in Renaissance Italy. Three other developments came *after* Direct painting. The first was the emergence of Romanticism in the 18th century—the idea that expressions of ordinary personal experiences of life were legitimate subject matters for art. The second was a revolution in color theory touched off by knowledge of the spectrum. Practical photography was the third, and we all know what that did, and is still doing.

A fourth item, the invention of the lowly paint tube, should also be mentioned. We take it for granted today, but that one single little object allowed painters to conveniently carry their colors anywhere. It liberated artists from their studios and made landscape painting, as we know it, possible. It should rightfully take its place in history along with the safety pin and zipper!

So we see that in the span of only 400 years, we acquired the means to depict things in three-dimensional space; to paint quickly and accurately almost anywhere on earth; to use anything imaginable for subjects; to understand color; and to store visual information instantly. (And all without a computer!) I do not include the emergence of abstraction as a milestone because I do not believe it fits in with the continuity of painting development that I am describing here.

SEEING THE LIGHT

Painters such as Frans Hals and Diego Velasquez were among the first to pick up on the Direct painting idea, followed by Vandyke, Rembrandt, Vermeer and eventually many others. While most of them continued to employ traditional technical methods of creating paintings, such as elaborate preparatory work, multiple painting sessions, and glazing, their way of seeing a subject was anything but traditional.



"CARNATIONS" Oil 18″ × 24″

I try not to paint flowers in flower vases if I can possibly help it (and I can)—I prefer the rather more interesting compositional opportunities of showing them in less formal ways. To me, they are like enchanting but naughty children, each crying for attention—or each perhaps, a bittersweet thought—but flowers are *never* simply pretty adornments.

A transition began in their world of painting from seeing "things" to seeing the *light* on things. It was the birth of Direct painting and led to its famous offspring, Impressionism.[2] It is hard for us to imagine how those painters must have struggled to understand what they were seeing, because today the ideas they explored seem like self-evident facts about perception. Thanks to them we know beyond any doubt that no matter how hard we try, we cannot ever physically "see" anything except light. The world is visible to us only because of the light that radiates from it or reflects from it. It is obvious then that *light* is the only thing we can paint. Think of it! You only have to learn to paint that one thing—no more memorizing of things. What a splendid gift they gave us! It's almost too simple to be true, but it *is* true dear friends, and it can extend the range of your subject matter far beyond your dreams, surpassing what you are merely familiar with or good at. It embraces everything visible, and that means the whole world!

When we do a Direct painting from life, we use the exact shapes of color that light creates on a subject to create a faithful illusion of what we physically see. The procedure requires that our visual world be viewed as a kind of vertical jigsaw puzzle—a flat, two-dimensional arrangement of coherent shapes, each with a specific color, value, and a set of edges—very much like what we experience by sitting too close to a big movie screen.[3] A Direct painting is almost always done from life with wet paint-into-wet and usually in one painting session—a single day or less. The object is to capture a subject as it is before any noticeable changes occur in it, to it, or in the artist—like a very slow motion snapshot done by hand. (Forgive the analogy.)

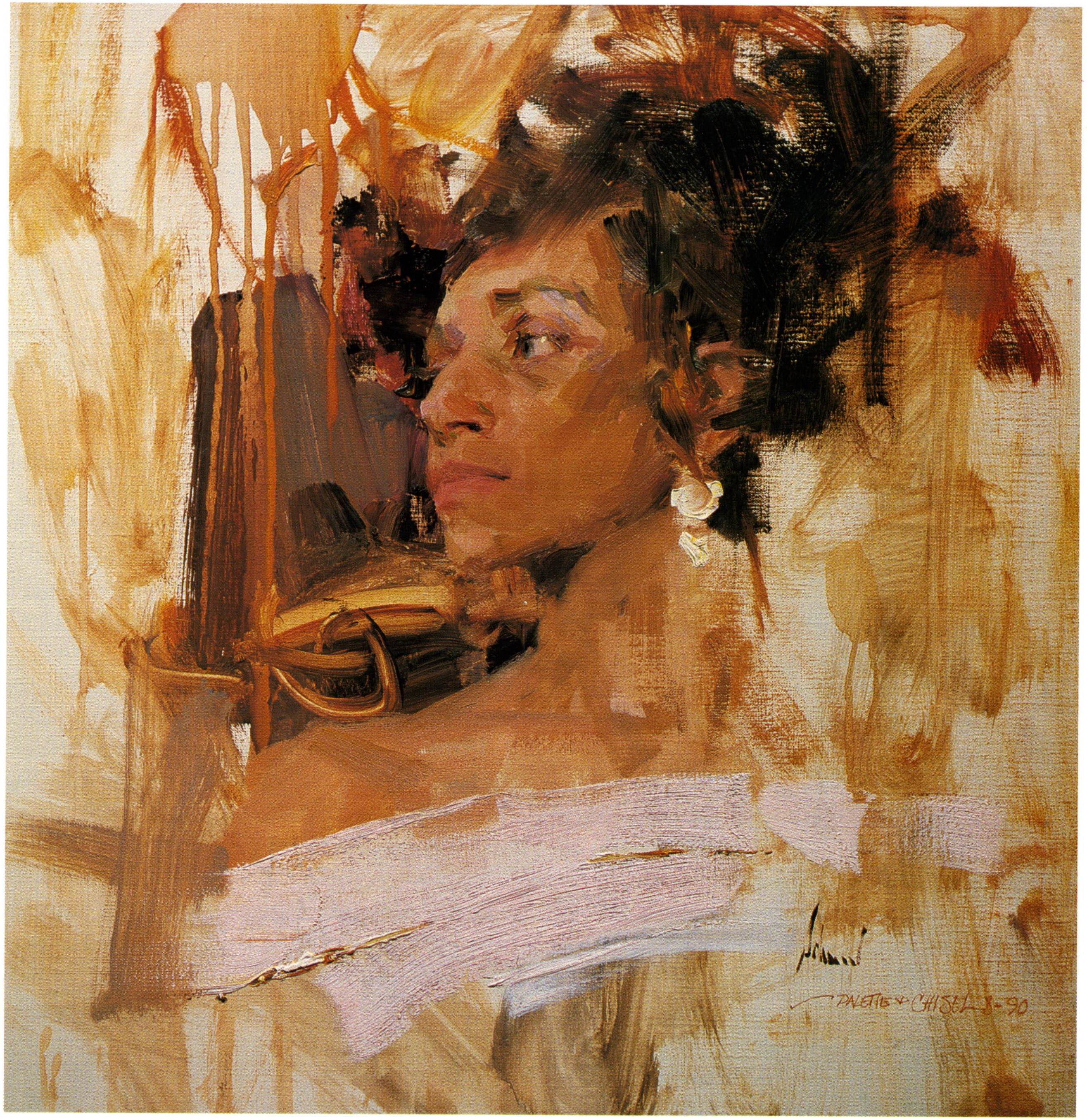
There is no set way to paint directly, because it is a way of seeing rather than a technique. It is to some extent a unique situation with every new subject. In a sense, Direct painting is the most interactive form of representational painting, because the subject and its characteristics, the painting environment, and you, act together. You are not simply a casual observer using a preexistent method to record something. Each painter of this genre has his or her own favorite routine. Cecilia Beaux, Wayman Adams, and Elizabeth Sparhawk Jones, for example, all had their own ways and produced individualistic results, but each was a Direct painter. After my initial training in painting, I arrived at my own way of doing things by continually working from life. I made every blunder you can imagine, including some truly unforgettable stupidities, but I was completely hooked on this glorious quest, and no amount of frustration or embarrassment could have stopped me.

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2 The "isms" that followed—Postimpressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Abstraction, Dadaism, Surrealism, Pop art, Op art, etc.—were completely unrelated to the developments in art up to and including early Impressionism. During the later decades of the 19th century, various artists took a ninety degree turn away from the then ongoing direction of painting. The result of their efforts is what we call Modern Art, a new type of human activity entirely different in both character and purpose from anything preceding it. It is linked only by the fact that in the beginning, and at various times afterward, "Modern" artists employed the same materials as "Classical" painters. The history and thought which underlies Modern art is complicated and deeply involved in the political, philosophical, and psychological upheaval of the past 100 years or so. Contrary to contemporary art doctrine, however, modern nonrepresentational art is *not* an evolutionary extension of classical painting any more than random computer music is an outgrowth of traditional violin technique.

3 We see this way when we first begin to use our eyes as infants. The world is two-dimensional to us until our eyes become coordinated. We then somehow combine our newly-acquired binocular vision and sense of touch to create a three-dimensional world.

When I paint, I do not think of myself as having a specific technique; I simply regard the things that I do as necessary to my intentions. Happily, in this case, as I was blithely on my way toward a rather academic profile, Nancy intervened (as she often does). She made me stop at this point, when my painting was strongest, leaving the drips and bold strokes. She said that I could kiss our relationship good-bye if I made even one more brush stroke. Her move was a truly classic example of the idea that it often takes two to do a good painting—one to paint it, and another to rap the painter smartly with a hammer before he or she can ruin it.



"PRINCESS"
Oil 21″ × 20″

While Alla Prima painting lacks a rigidly structured step-by-step procedure, all Direct paintings involve the same essentials. There is now no question in my mind that the first indispensable requirement when I paint from life is having a clear mental image of the picture I wish to end up with. Without that there can be no art in my effort. It doesn't have to be detailed, but I must know what I am shooting for. Moreover, my mental image must be a *painted* image, not simply an urge to paint something because I like it, or a picture in my mind of things with names (like trees, faces, flowers, chickens, etc.). I must resist the natural inclination to view my subject as tangible stuff. I must be able to see everything as merely shapes of color with distinctive edges where they join. This is the key to Direct painting—seeing color and light instead of actual things.

Also, because there is usually a limited time period to paint, I must have a disciplined, almost businesslike[4] pace of working. I must get the important things on the canvas without delay (yet not in haste). I need my materials ready and conveniently laid out so that I may proceed without interruption. Once I begin, I must concentrate, measure things carefully, and *stay in control.* I must work with the same painstaking intent as a cat stalking its prey.

MY WAY

I like to begin with a turpentine wash to eliminate the pristine white of the canvas (see Starting, Chap. 3), then indicate with a few lines the placement of the subject within the picture area. In most cases, I start in the spot where I want my focal point and immediately put down one color shape correctly (exactly the way I want it—no haphazard sketching). I make sure I get the next bit of color just as accurate, and then the third, and so forth.

I try to suppress the urge to speed up, and instead do my work at a very careful and deliberate pace. I concentrate on one spot at a time, comparing my current brushstroke to the prior one for accuracy, all the while resisting the temptation to streak around the canvas with a lot of speculative color.

My bullish intention remains to (try to) move from one correctly-painted patch to the next, never leaving the one I am working on until it is "right" relative to what is already there. For one reason or another, it occasionally doesn't work out exactly that way, but at least that's what I shoot for, and the results in most cases fall reasonably within my hopes.

Errors happen, of course. In my case, mainly from working too fast—trying to get too much on my canvas all at once. That causes carelessness in measuring for the drawing—making the little shapes of color the *wrong* shape. Usually I mess up when I'm trying to show off, so I have no good excuse (only the consequences of cockiness). In my normal rather demure state, however, I enter into a finish-as-I-go-along process after the first few strokes. That means I can stop at any point and still have something worthwhile. I like that option because stopping in the early stage of a painting is frequently a good thing. Many strongly-painted but less finished works are more interesting thanks to the implied power in the sureness and accuracy of what *is* there. In painting, as in many other things in life, less is usually better than more.

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4 Once, after a particularly spirited performance of the Brahms Piano Quintet, a famous lady gleefully remarked to me: "That's how Brahms should be played, *businesslike*!" I always liked that. (As long as it wasn't too businesslike.)

SMOOTH SAILING

The pleasure in this way of working is that by never leaving an error on the canvas, I avoid the agony of getting into trouble and wasting precious time with correcting. Instead, I can enjoy the concentration of putting increasingly precise elements on my canvas. That may sound difficult, but the cumulative effect of all that rightness happening is that painting actually gets easier as I go along because the correct work already on my canvas practically *tells* me what to do next.

Another welcome thing about it is that I have a picture that looks authentic from the very start—which means I don't have to wait until the end to see if anything good is going to turn out. Best of all perhaps, there is usually a point early on when I know for sure if I have a winner or not.

This system works well because it makes sense (and it is pure pleasure to see it unfold). By comparing all ongoing brushstrokes to the ones already on my canvas (that I know are right on the button), any ensuing mistakes will ring an alarm as soon as they are made—as opposed to making comparisons to approximate or half-right or wrong strokes. In that unfortunate situation I would *not* know if I was putting on a right one or not because there would be nothing "right" to compare it to!

I know there exists a romantic notion that painting should be a passionate struggle, but I don't believe that means we have to suffer as we work. I think painting can be passionate while still be smooth flowing and precise at the same time. Naturally, painting will always present problems, but rather than fighting them, I can use my discipline and experience to meet the challenge. By reducing complications to manageable factors—drawing, values, edges, colors—they can always be resolved. I get a kick out of being right. (Who doesn't?) In addition to having control, I can also savor the cheery thought that if my painting cannot be completed for some reason—if the model runs off to Bulgaria before the painting session ends, or I suddenly drop dead—I can rest peacefully with the assurance that what I left behind was probably correct.

DOING IT

In Direct painting the working speed (the rate at which accurate shapes accumulate) should only be as fast as controlled precision will allow.[5] Obviously, some parts of any painting can be done quickly, other parts need more time. This will vary with the intricacy of your subject, the size of a work, how detailed you wish to paint, and the level of your skill. When you are painting out-of-doors, many factors of weather, light, and other circumstances can affect the rate of working. Sometimes it is necessary to spend considerable time in a critical area to get it just right, but the payoff is in the time saved avoiding corrective painting. Getting things right is more important than simply finishing a painting.

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5 Sorolla seems to be an exception. Bill Mosby was fond of relating to me how Sorolla "painted like a pig eats," referring of course not to his manners but to the voraciousness with which he dispatched his canvases. That oft-repeated remark about him was apparently true, judging from other stories related by his students, who were seen to *weep* after seeing him paint. Sorolla's speed and energy, however, could only have been possible because of his superb discipline and experience.



"FAMILY DOLLS" Oil 24″ × 48″

Dolls are among my favorite subjects, but I do not have the urge to inject symbolism about them into my work. I find that unnecessary to make my point, so do not read anything cryptic or allegorical into this painting. Nevertheless, dolls are wonderfully evocative in that they are rather like little people. They are more interesting than other still life objects (like apples) in that respect—each doll reveals the mentality of its maker, and suggests the child who played with it. For that reason, I treat them as little portraits, which isn't easy. It is harder than you might think to keep the faces looking like dolls instead of tiny humans. Patience is required, and this painting required nine days to complete—a long time for me. I find it difficult to come back to a painting day after day, and still retain my freshness of thought.

There are no demands for elaborate or sophisticated brushwork with Direct painting, but if you want to show off, you can. Zorn and Sargent were notably fussy about how they put the paint on, and delighted in cocky flourishes—so much so that their dexterity is often the first thing noticed. However, they did it with such consummate skill that we delight in their bravado. Painters like Serov, Henri, and Twachtman simply didn't care about surface technique, and (to me) their work is somewhat stronger for that. The whole point of Direct painting is to depict faithfully what is seen, not to demonstrate cleverness with a brush or knife.

Your power is in how critically you observe your subject, the patience and care with which you paint it, not in how tricky you can throw the paint around. In any case, Direct painting is usually done as an "Alla Prima" (one session) rendering, and there is rarely time to be cute about the way you apply paint. Use any application that is familiar and comfortable to you. Paint thick or thin, with a knife or brush, use a rag, or your fingers; it doesn't matter—whatever gets the job done. Just make sure that these five things happen:

1. That the paint is going onto the right *PLACE* on the canvas.

2. That your brushstrokes are the right *SHAPE* and *SIZE*.

3. That they are the right *COLORS*.

4. That they are the right *VALUES*.

5. That the *EDGES* of color shapes have appropriate softness or hardness.

WHAT YOU SEE AND WHAT YOU KNOW

Theoretically, Direct painting demands no special knowledge of a subject other than its visual characteristics. Carolus-Duran, Sargent's teacher, felt it was unnecessary to have *any* familiarity with a subject. According to him, a painter merely needed a trained eye. Sargent himself went even further, saying that artists should not show how much they know about their subject, and better still, should know *nothing whatever* about the nature of what they are painting. He stressed a focus solely on the appearance of things.

Before you get upset about that, let me point out that what they were talking about was only the hypothetical *ideal.* They were saying that if your "eye" is perfect, all you need to do is faithfully copy the patchwork of colors that make things visible. I can't argue with the theory because it is valid, but the reality is another story. To begin with, no one (yet) is perfect. Furthermore, it is unlikely not to know at least *something* about what you are painting. Finally, you can bet that in actual practice, the masters (including Sargent and Carolus-Duran) relied on every last scrap of their experience and education to help them paint.



"SCULPTOR"
Oil 16″ × 18″

It is obviously impossible to not know what you do know. It is also foolish not to use helpful and available information. Anyone who has ever painted the human figure appreciates that knowing what all of those "bumps" *are* is a big help in painting what they look *like*. A basic understanding of anatomy is crucial to figure painting. Our knowledge of what we are looking at gives us an understanding of why our subjects look the way they do. It provides us with valuable shortcuts by telling us what to look *for*. Our knowledge also helps us make convincing changes where we want them, and it guides us through things that are ambiguous or confusing.

Each time you start a new painting, you bring to your effort everything that you have learned from every other painting you have ever done.[6] The books you read, the formal training you have had, your access to great paintings, all (should) come into play automatically. Having certain information in advance, the basic proportions of the human head for example, saves you from figuring them out each time you do a portrait study. Even though average proportions rarely match any face precisely, they act as a reference point from which to gauge the individual variants. An understanding of perspective is obviously an advantage in landscape painting, and a grasp of color mixing certainly helps in seeing color.

Your experience and learning are indispensable in tricky situations—like when the subject moves or when the light changes. So, while Direct painting rests upon capturing the shapes of color on your subject, your aggregate knowledge is working as well. Somewhere in the mysterious recesses of your mind, it is all there. You could not avoid including this knowledge in your technical decisions if you wanted to—just remember that it can never be complete. Therefore, use your knowledge as a tool, not as a rigid determinant. Listen to what nature tells you as well. Clearly, your experience and knowledge give you a powerful advantage in whatever you do. Try to bring this skill and learning into play when you paint, but keep in mind that the priority in Direct painting is still to *paint what you physically see whether you understand it or not.*

IF THERE IS EVER A CONFLICT IN YOUR MIND BETWEEN WHAT YOU KNOW AND WHAT YOU ARE SEEING, PAINT WHAT YOU SEE, BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T, THE RESULT WILL LOOK LIKE SOMETHING THAT ISN'T THERE.

This is only a brief description of Direct painting. There is much more to it, and in the chapters that follow I go into the working elements in much more detail. It will all be from my point of view of course, but remember, mine isn't the only one. The variety and styles of Direct painting are endless, and what I have outlined so far is the spirit and partial substance of it.

It is a very simple idea—reduce your subject to essential visual shapes and paint them accurately, nothing more than that, but it gave rise to some of the most joyful painting in all of history.

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6 Unfortunately, that also includes bad habits.



"NANCY PAINTING" Oil 12″ × 16″

CHAPTER THREE—STARTING

THE BIG MOMENT

The things you do at the start of a painting (from life or otherwise) will determine the entire course of your work. They will make the difference between an achievement or an ordeal. This is about taking control right away. It is never enough just to be in the throes of inspiration. Before you lift a brush, take some time to *think* about what you intend to do. Notice certain things, make a few decisions, and *then* start painting. Think of yourself as being at the start of a beautiful journey with some ordinary realities lying ahead. If it were a real trip, perhaps in a car going across country, you would want to have maps, credit cards, gas, enough time, and a destination. Of course, you must know how to drive; above all, you must have a route. You must have a *path* to get where you wish to go. Starting a painting is much the same.

YOUR TOOLS

Be prepared! All of your gear should be in a state of readiness so you can concentrate on painting. Choose your brushes as you would choose weapons before battle. Make certain they are clean and the bristles well-shaped. Have your palette set up beforehand with plenty of fresh paint. Make sure your turpentine, mineral spirits (or water if you are a watercolorist), are clean and ample. Have plenty of rags or paper towels handy. See that your easel is sturdy, and if you are outdoors, well-anchored. When all systems are ready, *relax*, take a deep breath, and approach your canvas as you would your lover or a sumptuous meal.

YOUR SUBJECT

When you first confront your subject, check to see that it is exactly what you want. That may be a problem if you are in an art school or painting group and someone else is in charge. Whatever situations you find yourself in, examine the subject carefully to see if anything about it bothers you. If it does (and if you can), make the changes you desire.

Scan your subject for things that are clearly impossible. After all, paint isn't magic! If you see that certain elements in the subject are beyond the limits of your pigments, try to form an idea beforehand of how you are going to handle those areas when you get to them. Acceptable compromises of one kind or another are usually possible. In the urgency to "get going" with a painting, it is tempting to leave those solutions for later, but don't let that happen. Know what you must do *before* you do it![1] I am not suggesting that you must be able to visualize your eventual painting in *complete* detail, only that you scrutinize your subject at the beginning for potential problems, and either come up with answers or make changes at the *start*. I can trace many of my failures back to the beginning of a painting when I rushed into it just to get going, only to discover later that I hadn't the slightest idea of how I was going to handle certain key areas. Rude surprises later are no fun just when everything else is going nicely.

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1 Remember the trial lawyer's rule—never ask a question unless you already know the answer!

If you are happy with your subject and there are no mysteries about it remaining in your mind, do a simple analysis of what is in front of you. It is not enough to see what color eyes the model has and then start. Before you begin any painting, have a clear grasp of the distribution of light on the subject. Notice its overall direction (that's easy), and its temperature, which is sometimes not so easy (see Chapter 7). Start by asking yourself critical questions such as the following:

1. Which side of the subject is lightest or darkest? This may seem simple, but in landscape painting, it is not always obvious.

2. Is the light clear and sharp or diffused? Are there strong cast shadows or are the darks softly modeled? Look at the edges of the shadows for that, bright light by itself will not necessarily produce hard edges. Is there any strong reflected light bouncing around?

3. Where are the *lightest* light areas, the *darkest* darks, the *sharpest* edges, the completely "lost" edges? This is particularly important in establishing the range of values and edges in a painting. (Chapter 5.)

4. How warm or cool is the light? Are the shadows warmer or cooler than the light areas on the subject?

5. Where are the most powerful colors? What are they?

6. Is there an obvious color harmony in the subject as a whole, or is the harmony subtle, as in daylight? (Chapter 7.) Is the harmony created by the light amplified by related local colors in the subject? (This happens with snow and water and fields of grass.)

7. What sort of technique do you envision? How do you want to put your paint on? Are you going to use a broken color rendering, or strong fluid brushwork, or something else? Do you intend a thickly painted rendering or thin? Where are you going to shovel the paint on, and where do you want to keep it thin? (Chapter 9.)

8. Where are the strong simple areas, and where do you have to be especially careful?

9. Are there any drawing problems? Is there foreshortening to contend with? Are there perspective distortions, or areas of ambiguity or confusion? Is there anything in the subject that would look *weird* if painted?

10. Is there good light on your canvas? Is the light going to change?

11. Are you going to have a problem with glare on your canvas? If so, how are you going to deal with it?

12. Is the subject going to change? What are you going to do about that?

13. Lastly (as if all of that weren't enough), consider how much of what you are looking at you really *need* to paint, or *want* to paint, or have *time* to paint.

Well—*THAT* is quite a list. I could have gone on for several more pages, but I don't want you to get the idea that you must conduct an exhaustive countdown to blast-off each time you begin a painting. Besides, you cannot foresee *everything* at the outset, there is too much, and you might end up in a kind of paralysis. I am recommending only that you take time to notice certain important details, the way you would at the start of any new task.

The actual business of painting unfolds as a stroke-by-stroke process, and every work demands countless unpredictable decisions made along the way. Nevertheless, and like it or not, all of those transient decisions will be governed by the few crucial choices and observations made at the start. There really aren't *that* many, and with experience and discipline you will be able to take them all in with a few quick glances. It will become second nature to you—like checking to see if your more vital buttons are buttoned before you go out. After all, you can't stand around talking to yourself all day, there is a painting to be done!

ZEROING IN

One good short cut is to make a decision about which of the visual aspects of your subject you wish to emphasize. The idea is to focus more sharply on your objective and ignore things you are not interested in. To do this, ask yourself what made you choose your subject (just liking it is not enough). Try to identify the tangible (paintable) element, and be as specific as you can:

Are you seeing a wonderful display of COLOR?

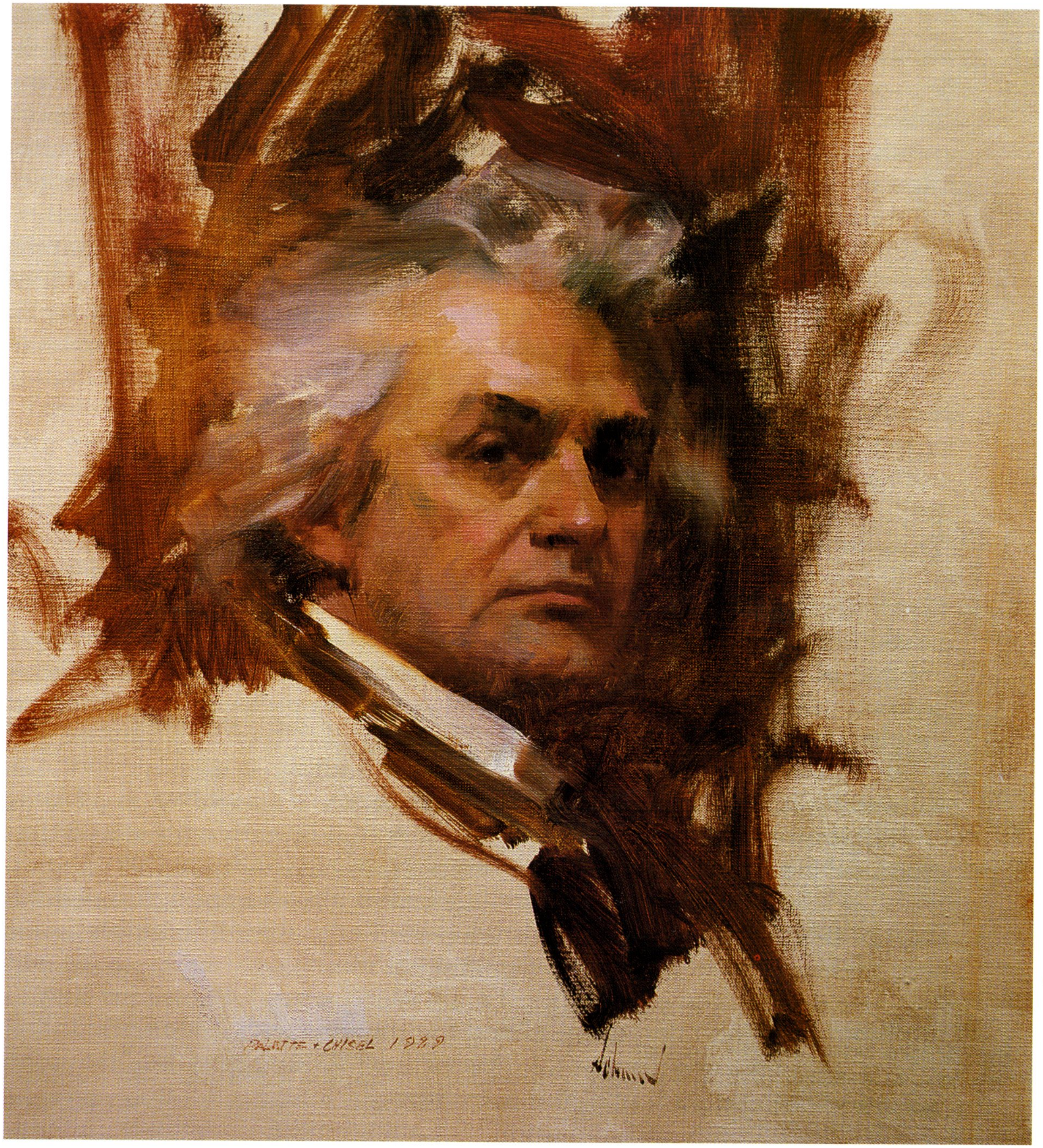
Do you see a dramatic study in VALUES?

Are you intrigued by the DRAWING—the shapes and subtle forms?

Or are you more interested in the DESIGN in your subject—the relationship of masses or lines.

Perhaps you just wish to play around and experiment. (Always refreshing!)

This is one of hundreds of sketches I did at the Palette & Chisel Academy between 1984 and 1991. Most, like this one, were two or four hour studies done in a day or in one evening. All were essentially just block-ins carried a few steps forward, but stopping, in most cases, short of formal portraiture. In the beginning, I was doing them simply for my own pleasure and education, but I soon came to appreciate the value of painting within a group. The artists at the Academy were, and surely still are, a wonderfully eclectic bunch. Along with the camaraderie of working with other struggling painters, I learned about their (and my) most common problems, principally those that arise in painting from life. Drawing was, by far, the most prevalent, though least acknowledged, technical fault. The lack of a well-ordered and logical starting method was the typical procedural problem. A poor start inevitably led to failure.



"PRESIDENT DON"
Oil 20″ × 18″

If you decide that color is your goal, then don't be so fussy about elaborate development of the drawing or values or edges. (That seemed to be Monet's choice.) If, on the other hand, you are intrigued by the dramatic values and intricate drawing opportunities, then settle for merely adequate color and concentrate your razzle-dazzle on those other qualities. (Sargent did this habitually, so did Zorn.) I'm not advising that you be slipshod in the areas of secondary interest. Be accurate, but just don't go overboard with them. You will rarely have enough time to paint everything to its limit anyway unless you are doing a still life, but even then your painting will be stronger if a single element predominates (as the solo part stands out in a concerto).

Ah ha!—you may say—what about the aesthetic qualities to be captured in a subject? What about the *spiritual* mood in a landscape or the expression in a person's eyes? What about tenderness, compassion, feeling, or simple beauty? Well, I'm sorry to say, none of those things comes in paint tubes. All of those intangible qualities are *feelings* that you have about your subject, and all must be reduced to shapes of paint before they can appear on your canvas. The look of innocent wonder in a child's face must be seen as a drawing matter; the mood in a landscape is probably a study in colors, values, and edges. If you can translate your poetic insight into technical terms like that, then it should not be difficult to determine which visual element or combination of elements in the subject is (or are) producing the artistic attribute that fascinates you.

THE SEQUENCE

Don't just start smooshing pigments around. Think about the *order* in which you will apply your key elements. There will always be some obvious things about your subject or circumstances that will suggest a logical sequence of painting. Certainly the first considerations should be about the kind of picture you have in mind, the nature of your subject, a realistic awareness of your ability, and the time available for working. Next should come decisions on what is most important *technically* in your subject, and what type of underpainting you need, the preparatory work (if any), which will make ensuing edges easier to achieve.

Whenever I can, I paint the powerful and obvious things in my subject first. I do the easy-to-see elements such as clear-cut shapes, distinct colors, and strong values, because it is a sure way to get correct painting on the canvas right away—and the sooner I have accurate painting in place, the easier the rest of it will be. Also, a painting always goes more smoothly if I leave the optional detail for later.

As I paint, I try to anticipate the edges to come. Here is an example, one that often occurs in landscape painting. Many landscapes appear to have four somewhat distinct "planes"; a foreground, middle-ground, the distance, and sky. The order in which they are laid on can work either *with* me or *against* me. In starting, I like to put them in from back to front—the sky first, then distant forms, then the middle-ground elements, and lastly the things up close. Once those areas have been established, I can go back to paint into any spot I wish and be assured of achieving integrated edges. If, however, I paint say, trees first and then attempt to put the sky behind them, the opposite will happen. The resulting edges will make the sky appear to be in *front* of the trees!

In my experience, any situation where complex forms are seen against a simple and highly-contrasting background requires the background to be *lightly* painted first, followed by the forms, then some repainting back and forth of both to achieve the variety of edges necessary for a three-dimensional effect.

To give another example: If I am doing a portrait and I draw the features with lines before I put on a general flesh tone, it will be awkward to paint the flesh color up to and around the features. Repainting of the features will be necessary then to produce the correct edges. In nearly all cases, regardless of the subject, it is usually safer to establish the general tones first, and then paint the smaller shapes, such as facial features, *into* them.

These are examples of my working habits, not my rules. I don't always paint exactly as I have described and you shouldn't either. Be flexible—the order in which you introduce the elements of a painting should not be a rigid system. What worked last time may not work this time. You need to be flexible enough to adapt to the individual demands of each situation. Don't follow a procedure because you read it somewhere, or some artist (including me) says that that's the way it should be done. It *must* make good sense to you, and it must apply to your circumstances.

THICK AND THIN

If you are an oil painter, there is also the *consistency* of paint to consider. It is a good idea to follow the old tried-and-true advice of progressing from thin paint[2] to thick paint. (Or "fat" over "lean" as in the older references.) Thick paint in the beginning stage is not necessary, and it can be maddening to work into. Save the buttery stuff for the finished top layer brushstrokes.

Thick paint over thin is also safer from the standpoint of permanency. Thin paint on top of thick is likely to crack even when working wet-into-wet. Extremely thick paint (more than 3mm or 1/8 inch) on canvas is certain to crack, even under the most favorable conditions. Normal fluctuations in temperature and humidity, and time itself will see to that. If you are fond of thick paint, do it on a more rigid support, something other than stretched canvas (such as white lead primed untempered Masonite™) to reduce the cracking factor.

BRIGHT MINDS

Explore the systems of successful painters for ideas you can use. If you are fortunate enough to be able to travel, use that opportunity to visit museums to see the *unfinished* works of masters. The major institutions may not show many because they prefer the attention (and therefore revenue) gained from finished pieces. However, if you seek out the smaller places, or better still the studios and homes of painters that are open to the public (like Sorolla's in Madrid, and others), you will find many of their paintings in various stages of completion. Study them! They are marvelous lessons in procedure because they show the sequence of working.

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2 Thin does not necessarily mean *thinned* with medium or solvent such as turpentine. It also means paint of standard consistency sparingly applied.

See if you can figure out why they chose their particular approach, and where you think they would have taken it. Try to analyze what they did and what their problems were. Or better still, what their problems would have been, had they continued. (I enjoy such speculations.) Look at their smaller on-the-spot color sketches too. Each one is like a miniature beginning. It is great fun to do this detective work instead of just gawking at finished masterpieces. I think more can be learned from those half-starts and personal sketches than from their major works. When I look at them I can almost hear the artist thinking.



"ALASKA SALMON BOAT" Oil 10″ × 16″

WHAT THE BEGINNING SHOULD ACCOMPLISH

You will know you have a good start when you have enough correct painting on your canvas so you can clearly see where your work is headed, and that the direction is the one you *intended*. This initial stage is usually referred to as a "block-in." The amount of painting necessary to secure a useful beginning will vary. One painter may need a very extensive block-in to feel confident, while another might need only a few accurately placed lines and dots.

The nature of the subject and how you intend to paint it will call for block-ins that may be quite simple in some situations and more complex in others. A subject containing only a few well-defined shapes is easier to block in than one filled with a jumble of contrasting values and colors. A simple portrait study, a head centered within a canvas, for example, might require no block-in at all, merely a few colors for the flesh tones. Large compositional paintings with many elements often call for extensive block-ins before a clear picture of their design effectiveness can be seen. Likewise, subjects that are very elaborate and intricate in drawing need more careful attention at the start. It is a good idea to get the hang of several block-in methods so that you are capable of choosing an appropriate response.

One of my criteria is how *little* I need to put on the canvas before I can get into finishing brushwork.[3] My block-in will be only what is necessary to deal with the size of my picture, the complexity of the subject, the type of rendering I wish to use, and the available time I have.

SOME STARTING APPROACHES (Block-ins)

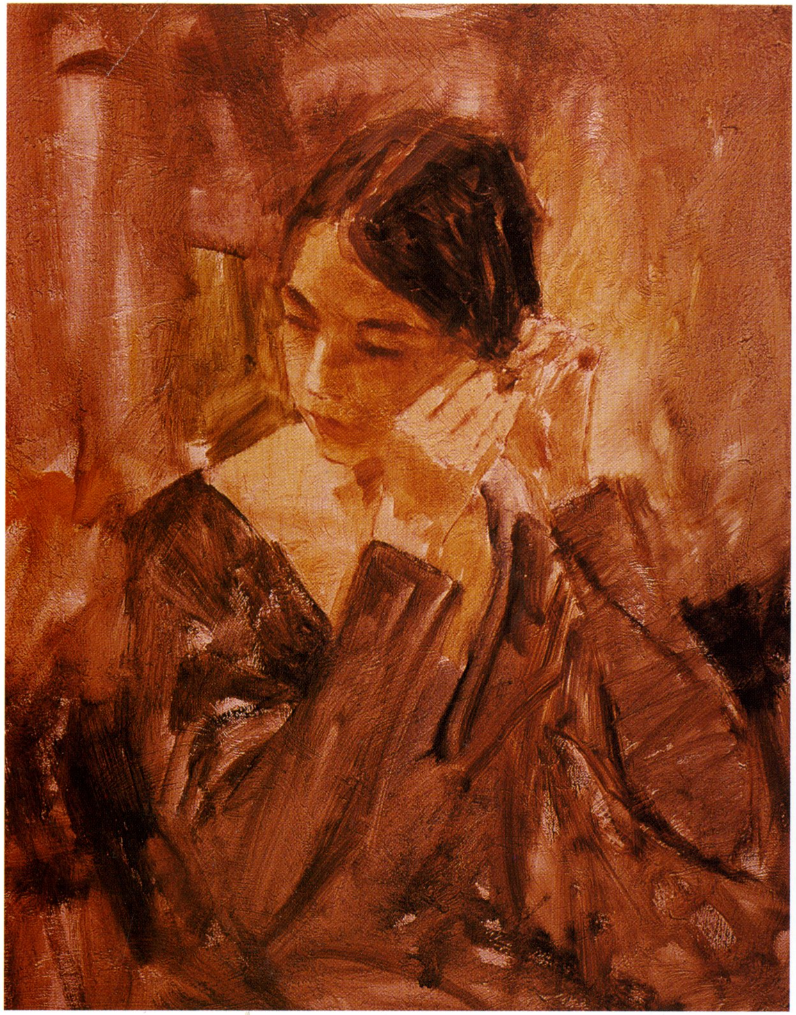
The many ways of rationally starting a painting can be divided into two rather broad categories—those systems that introduce accurate pictorial elements *gradually*, and those which establish them *immediately*.

The first group of starting methods (gradual) is the most commonplace; nearly all represent different ways to manage the complexities of color and form *without* taking everything on all at once. They involve sneaking up on the subject in one way or another. Most of these gradational systems withhold certain important items until the very end—things like the most powerful colors on the subject, the pure white or black values, and even the exact drawing. Those strong punches are held in reserve for the final stages of the work. The idea is to avoid making specific commitments until a comfortable *approximation* of the subject is on the canvas—to be able to visualize the painting as a whole *before* the application of the true colors, values, edges, and drawing.

The second group of starting systems is more sophisticated. They bypass the sketchy stage and go directly into the actual colors and shapes seen on the subject. There are as few preliminaries as possible, and accurate painting starts with the first strokes. However, they require a more distinct mental image of the finished work (to serve as a guide), and much tighter discipline, especially in drawing. Although I have worked with all of the familiar starting methods in the years I have been painting, I have come to use these rather impromptu beginnings more and more, not because they are better, but because they are more fun.

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3 "Finishing" for me is any stroke I apply that does not need changing or alteration by overpainting. Finished strokes are those that will appear on the surface of the painting when it is completed.



"EARRING"—Beginning stage



"EARRING" Oil 16″ × 12″

This small quick study was started as a line and mass block-in because the pose was not an easy one for the model to maintain, and I had to indicate her hand positions immediately. The colors and values were uncomplicated, so it was mostly a problem in drawing. It was necessary to establish the placement of the hands in relation to the head at the very beginning because they act together as a single unit. The line approach with a thin wash for the masses seemed best. Once the important major shapes were placed, I could render them individually while still having the whole picture before me. The excessive warmth of the tones is due to a slight deterioration of the dyes in the photographic film I was using at the time. The actual color of the model's dress in the original painting, for example, was Ultramarine Blue.

Here are six ways that I start a painting. All are oil painting procedures, but the principles involved can, for the most part, be applied to other mediums. The exception is watercolor; its requirements demand a unique sequence of paint application. In practice I don't always use these ways entirely as discrete systems, rather I use them in combination according to my need.

1. LINE AND MASS BLOCK-IN

This time honored method goes so far back in time that its origins are lost—perhaps to when our prehistoric pals first drew on cave walls. The Minoans used it on their pornographic pottery (as did the Incas), the Chinese used it on their screens, our Renaissance colleagues used it for everything, and our friend, John Singer Sargent (among many others) used it a lot for larger works.

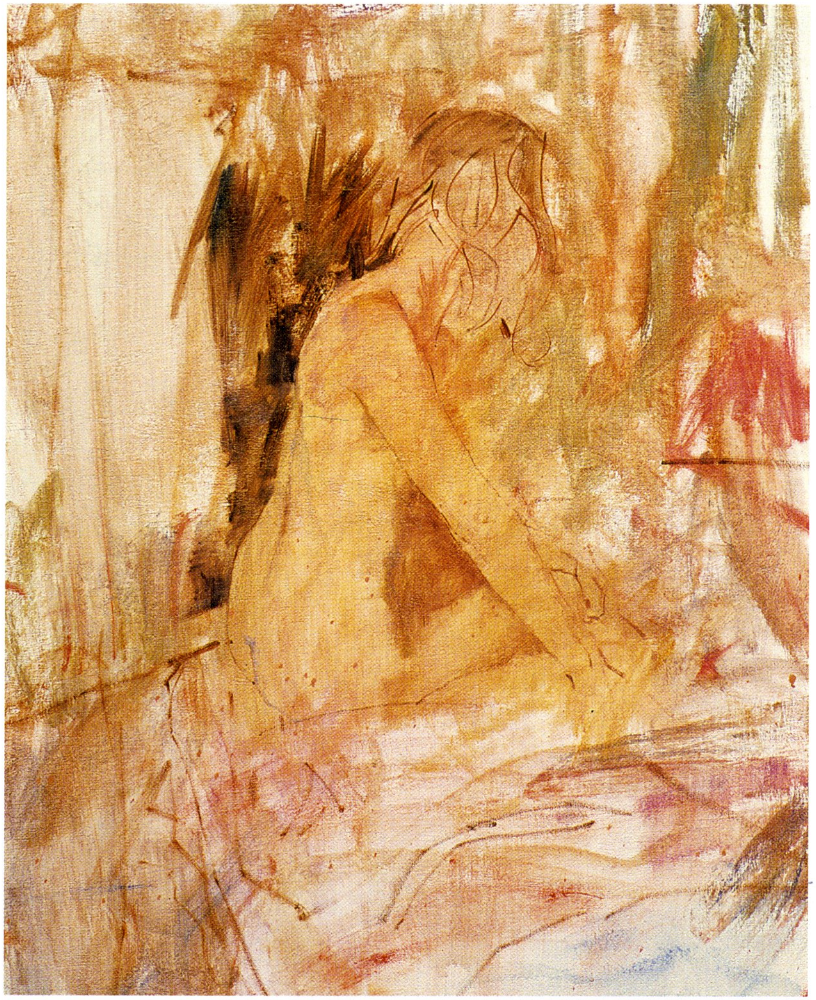
This block-in is little more than a line drawing with colors and values placed between the lines—almost like a coloring book or paint-by-numbers rendering. (Except that there are *no* numbers, and *you* do the lines too.) In oil painting it is usually rendered on a canvas lightly-toned with a wash of a gray color to "kill" the white ground. (Black and Terra Rosa mixture for example.) The lines are customarily done with oil paint or charcoal (the two favorites), but pencil, pastel, and almost any other inert substance will do just as well.

The mass tones are laid on between the lines very thinly, as a "scumble" (paint scrubbed on), or as a wash of oils thinned with turpentine or one of its substitutes, such as mineral spirits. When the colored drawing is finished, it is painted over completely with opaque pigment, which of course, obliterates the entire thing. Why go to all of that work and then cover it up? Because it serves a real need. Most painters are more at ease starting with outlines rather than masses.[4] In our training, probably all of us were taught to use a line drawing as a guide. I have watched many painters work from life, and I have rarely come across one who did not need *some* way to visualize his or her artistic idea as a line drawing before starting. It seems almost instinctive to use lines, even though the first ones placed may be rather slapdash.[5]

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4 We learn to draw this way as children. The various art forms we are involved with when we are young—cartoons, comic books, coloring books, etc.—are mostly colored line drawings. Perhaps our later sense of security working within lines stems from this early grounding. It is a learned experience, however. Babies and very young children make their own scribbles spontaneously, then progress to protodrawings. Because of the undeveloped motor control in their hands, they are initially unable to stay within lines when coloring in their first coloring books. They must be pressured to do that by adults, thus for better or worse, a lifelong habit is established.

5 Sargent often required very little to get going on a portrait head; a few lines with a charcoal stick to indicate placement of the head, then a transparent wash for all the darks in the subject and background, and bingo! He was ready for the serious paint.



"NUDE"—Stage one



"NUDE"—Stage two

This painting (appearing only in its finished stage in my book on figure painting) is a line and mass block-in similar to the way I started paintings in art school. In stage one, I used few lines because the subject is simple in form—back views always are, which is why, with so little to work with, it is important to get things right. Note that the transparent wash on the figure is very close to the finished flesh tones, and I have some of the key darks indicated. In stage two, I am already into the finishing colors, and it is clear where this painting is headed.



"NUDE"—Stage three



"NUDE" Oil 30″ × 24″

Stage three shows the figure nearly complete. The picture as a whole is almost at the point (in retrospect) that I wish I had stopped. The note of red which appears in the final stage is a definite plus, but it should have been placed at the very beginning, because it is such a strong clear color. The final stage also has some nice palette knife work in the foreground, and the strong whites in the same area enhance the richness of the model's skin color, so it is not a total loss.



"PAINTER" Oil 9″ × 19″

The day was cold and windy at the Ellis Ranch in the foothills of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. The painter is a sketching companion (who did better than I). The problem for both of us was to get something done fast before we froze. The most direct approach, therefore, was working with careful drawing and brushwork from the start. It was only necessary to apply a tone for the sky, the trees and the foreground, before getting into the detailed painting of Lou. Notice that the sharp edges and strong colors are on the figure (my priority and focal point), and the rest of the picture is what may be called broad brush painting.

Starting out in a sketchy way feels safe. You can fool around trying this and that until things seem "right," then go on to do as much correcting and manipulation of your composition and drawing as you need—*before* you lay in the serious paint. Few things in painting are more painful than having to scrape off some masterly work done in the wrong spot!

When *you* begin with sketchy lines, keep in mind that their function is to establish the general *placement* of your subject within the picture area, rather than the *precise* outlines of what you are going to paint. Worry only about *where* you wish to put your major shapes, and how big or little they are. Don't go for detail or profound revelations about the subject at this point. The goal of this sketching stage is to organize the overall composition and merely suggest important drawing elements, such as anatomy, or perspective, or proportions. Keep your paint thin (but not necessarily thinned), transparent if possible, as you sketch. A buildup of heavy paint in the beginning can be troublesome later.

When all that has been accomplished, the sketchy work has served its purpose. It is pointless to continue with it unless you intend *that* look to be the prevailing surface appearance for the remainder of the painting. The Impressionists and many others did just that, but they were pursuing "broken color" effects to the exclusion of other pictorial elements. If you wish to take your painting beyond mere scintillating dabs of color, you must break away from sketching and get careful. You must shift your thinking and make the lines and placement of masses as accurate as you can, because their new job is to pinpoint *exactly* where the finishing paint must go.

This line and mass block-in is ideal for organizing complex compositions, particularly larger paintings with numerous figures or objects. It is important to keep the drawing lines very fine in portrait or figure painting. If you use a brush that leaves half-inch wide lines to draw an attractive lady's nose, the result could be disastrous. It isn't necessary to be squeaky tight with your drawing, just make sure the lines that you make do not constitute discrete shapes in themselves. Your lines should define a border between shapes without adding volume to the features. It isn't necessary to use tiny brushes for your lines unless you prefer to. If your large flat bristle brushes are good quality and well-shaped, they will produce fine lines as well as broad strokes. The palette knife, used on edge, is perfect for more subtle lines.

DRAWBACKS

There are two weaknesses in this line drawing approach. First, it is very time consuming. If time is important (as in landscape painting), you may want to keep things brief by going after only the largest masses in your painting. If your subject is too complicated to be reduced to a few simple areas, then you must either find more time to complete the picture by arranging for several painting sessions, or find a different approach. (I come to that later.)

Second, the quality of edges may suffer when the finishing paint is applied because of a tendency to paint *up to* the lines, but not *into* them. The ensuing rendering will lack the looseness and fluidity it might otherwise have. Sargent seemed to get around all of that very nicely because he was not dependent on his lines. They represented only indications to him.

Perhaps because of the need to have them in the first place, less self-assured painters and even experienced ones are reluctant to see the lines disappear. However, it should not be intimidating. If you want to redraw the lines, you should be able to.[6] Besides, I don't know of any other way of letting go than just doing it.

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6 I remember Bill Mosby deliberately wiping away my perfectly good paintings from time to time to see if I could repaint them. He explained that doing a painting well *once* might be an accident—but not twice in succession.



"IRON FENCE" Oil 16″ × 30″

"IRON FENCE" appeared as painting sequences in my earlier landscape book. This intermediate stage is the only photo that survives of that series. It shows how transparent washes can be used as an underpainting when a subject has complex drawing features. The great advantage of this method is that the transparent darks here can be retained throughout the finishing process, and there is no excessive paint in the light areas to interfere with subsequent overpainting. Observe that I gave attention to the values, drawing, *and* edges at this point. My only real problem was in maintaining the soft edges during the finishing process. The painting was completed in one day, so I was able to work wet-into wet, which made it easy to achieve the edges I wanted.

2. TRANSPARENT (OIL) MONOCHROME BLOCK-IN

The transparent monochrome block-in is a step up from the previous method. It is a nearly complete value study done with one color on a white lead ground. The rationale here is that you can work out all the problems in value, drawing, *and* edges, without worrying about color—*then* do the finished painting on top of it with opaque paint. The rendering itself is similar in principle to doing a full value charcoal or Conté drawing—except that brushes and paints are used instead of sticks of dry pigment. Lights and darks are achieved by adding or removing pigment from the canvas surface. No white paint is used to create values in the block-in. The final result is a color painting on top of a monochrome painting.

The beauty of working with monochrome paint in this way is that the block-in looks like the subject almost immediately because of the attention to edges and values. The fun of it is that paint can be pushed around endlessly without a buildup of paint, and without creating a mess of dismal color (since there is only one color).

The working surface must be nonabsorbent and smooth. A high quality linen canvas or a masonite panel with a minimum of texture is best. Whatever the support, it must be primed with *white lead.* I now use a smooth textured, triple primed canvas. Other grounds such as acrylic prime will not work; it stains immediately and cannot be brought back to pure white, as white lead can. To test any surface for its manipulative capability, apply some strong color such as Terra Rosa, allow it to sit for a minute, then wipe it off with a rag. If the Terra Rosa comes away completely leaving the original white ground, it is the right stuff.

It is possible to enhance the working quality of both the paint and the canvas by applying a whisper thin film of cold-pressed linseed oil to the surface, or mixing a drop into the paint itself. As long as the oil is kept to a minimum, there will be no problems with the final overpainting.

STAY WARM

I use warm red or brown earth colors for my block-in—*never* cool colors or yellows. Blue, green, and violet colors in an underpainting cause a "muddy" look when they show through the final paint. A yellow underpainting causes a disruptive effect in judging subsequent colors, particularly with portraits or figurative work. It also tends to mix into subsequent paint, or it shows through between brushstrokes, producing a disagreeable jaundiced look. Warm red, red-brown, and orange-brown earth colors, on the other hand, act to enhance the final darks in a painting, because they more closely replicate the actual temperature relationships. I rarely go as dark as black with this block-in, but when it *is* necessary, I use Transparent Oxide Brown with a touch of Ultramarine Blue mixed in. Otherwise my most frequent choice for the monochrome color is usually Terra Rosa alone. I prefer to use these pigments because I tend to leave some portion of the block-in visible as part of my finished painting, and they are absolutely permanent even in the thinnest of washes.[7]

If you have doubts about a block-in color, simply mix a color that doesn't resemble any identifiable color family; such a color will, at least, not interfere with anything.

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7 Stay away from Vandyke Brown or Burnt Umber for an underpainting (or for anything else). Both have a nasty habit of cracking. Simple mixtures of more stable colors will easily match them. Try combinations of Transparent Oxide Red, Burnt Sienna, and Ultramarine Blue. A Transparent Oxide Red and Viridian mixture is ideal for underpainting a landscape.



"MONOCHROME STUDY" Oil 16″ × 12″

Terra Rosa and Venetian Red were used for rendering this quick (two hour) portrait of a young actress. It shows how monochrome painting can be used effectively if natural color is not the main goal. I was after her expression, and that is what I got. Full color could not have done the job better. To add just a bit of extra color quality, I gave my canvas a very light wash of Viridian plus Transparent Oxide Red. I was careful, however, to let the mineral spirits of the wash dry thoroughly before I worked into it with my earth colors.

The quality of the ground, like the quality of paper in a watercolor, is crucial to this way of working. A white lead ground, one that is double primed, and preferably triple primed is ideal (whether used with canvas or a panel). Acrylic gesso grounds will not do because they stain immediately, and pigment cannot be removed entirely. I must be able to manipulate my paint so that I can wipe my canvas back to its white state. The extra layers of priming are also necessary if I use steel wool or fine sandpaper to obtain values or textures.

There seems to be no end of fascinating effects possible with this transparent monochrome approach. It can be as bold or delicate as you choose. It is a superb way to learn how to draw with paint, and a splendid introduction to color temperature. It's fun too.

The rendering itself is a straightforward process of brushing on the dark values and wiping away paint to get the light values. The lights can be wiped away with almost anything—a clean brush, rags, paper towels or tissues, fingers, Q-tips, various grades of steel wool and sandpaper—whatever does the job. Clean turpentine, mineral spirits, and acetone (occasionally) will make the wiping more effective, but they must be used *sparingly*. They are extremely difficult to manipulate, and it is easy to inadvertently ruin things. I use solvents only when I apply my initial washes, or if there are no other means to expose the pure white of the canvas (as when I need a highlight). After I have used a solvent, I wait several minutes for it to evaporate entirely, or blot (not wipe) the area carefully with an absorbent towel before resuming work. Play it safe and use dry methods to add or remove paint before resorting to solvents.

The same caution applies to putting on the paint—keep away from *wetness*. I find that "soupy" paint—pigment thinned with medium or solvent—is difficult to control. If it does happen to land in the right place, it is tricky to make the edges behave when neighboring paint is applied. Therefore, to maintain control in the critical drawing areas, I use my pigment in the same consistency as it comes from the tube rather than thinning it. If I want a fluid look, I can lightly brush over the desired area *once* (and once only) with a soft sable or badger brush moistened very lightly with painting medium. If that fails, a satisfactory look of transparent wash can be duplicated by scumbling or lightly scrubbing the paint on.

There is one catch to all of this. It is possible to carry this method to the point where the block-in resembles a large vintage photograph. This in itself is not necessarily a problem, but if it is too detailed and "tight," there might be a reluctance to paint over it in a free and loose manner—in a "painterly" way. (I use the word *painterly* to mean *Bravura,*[8] a style of paint application characterized by flowing *impasto*[9] brushstrokes—where the qualities of paint itself are essential to the impact of a picture—the opposite of "tight.") The inclination may be to overpaint timidly—falling into the mistake of trying to preserve the lines underneath. When this pressure develops I try to remember who is calling the shots. *I am!* I never allow myself to imagine that a painting or my subject is forcing me to do what I do. A painting is an inanimate object, I have a brain. So do you.

Such pitfalls need not become problems if I keep in mind at the start of the block-in that its purpose is to guide me, and that I can render it accurately without getting so complicated and intricate that it becomes constricting. Even if it does, I can always reverse the process—I am always in charge! I can do or undo anything, which is why I like oil paint. One of its many advantages is that mistakes need not be permanent. It has a built-in safety factor. Nothing is ever unfixable. The worst possible blunder can be undone. A careful swipe with my palette knife will erase my worst sins.

I can go back and change my squeaky little lines into whatever I wish. I can also paint over them without misgivings—which makes the best sense since that is my intention in the first place. The sole purpose of *any* preliminary work I do (work that will likely be covered by ensuing paint), is to help me in the course of finishing by providing information about *where* things will go, how light or dark those things will be, and what their shapes and colors are. Once I know those things, the rest is merrymaking.

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8 From the Italian *bravo*—excellent.

9 Also Italian, from *impastare*—to make paste.



"MOLLY" Oil 8″ × 12″

"MOLLY" is another example of a transparent monochrome oil painting. It was done from a photo, of course. No child, not even my perfect angels, could hold this pose for more than a few seconds. I added a touch of Yellow Ochre Light to the Terra Rosa for this one to warm things up a bit. I must mention that care must be taken to keep the yellow out of the light areas. Excessive yellow in the skin tones, even in an Oriental model, gives the subject a slightly diseased look. The safest way to render this combination of colors is to do the entire picture in the cooler Terra Rosa or Venetian Red first, and then add the Yellow Ochre/Terra Rosa mixture to the darks, which is what I did here.

As a note of historical interest, it is worth mentioning that this use of a fully-developed monochrome underpainting has countless variations that reach back in time, mainly in European painting, though not nearly as far as the Line and Mass method. The monochrome block-in grew out of the standard glazing techniques predating the introduction of oil paint some 600 years ago. The glazing process, like our monochrome wash, also employs a painting-under-a-painting system, but it reverses the sequence. Instead of opaque paint over transparent, glazing is transparent over opaque. The similarity, however, ends right there.

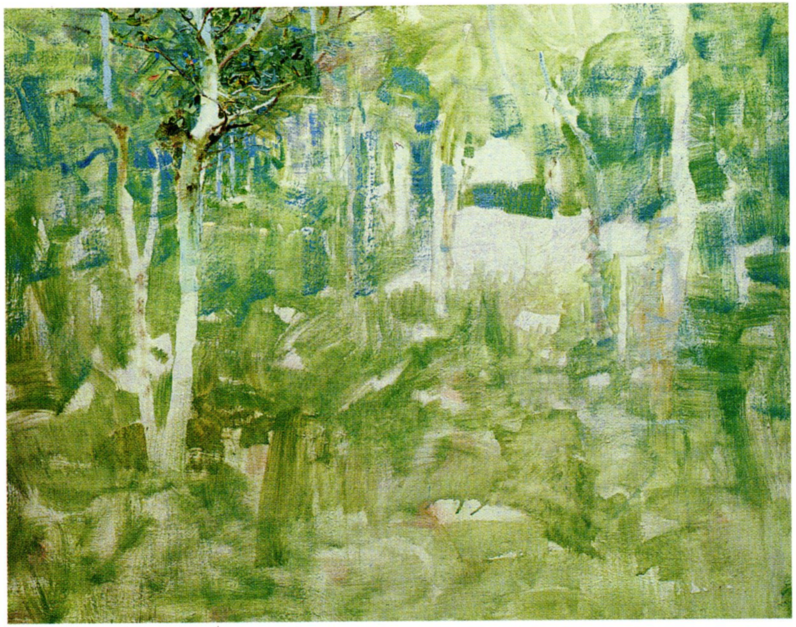
In case you are ever tempted to try glazing, it is worth noting that for pure interminable tediousness, nothing beats it. The procedure begins with a careful line drawing. Over that, a complete monochrome painting is done with opaque paint, usually employing a cool black as the base color, plus white. (The result is a deathly photographic effect.) When the painting is thoroughly dry, color is introduced by the application of successive layers of transparent paint films (glazes) until the desired colors are reached. If the drying times between glazes are lumped together, the process could add up to many months or even years for the completion of one painting. Meanwhile, the subject, not to mention the inspiration, could dry up and blow away. Somehow, though, the masters of this technique gave us some brilliant treasures.

3. TRANSPARENT MONOCHROME AS A FINISHED PAINTING

Often when I do a monochrome block-in as I have just described, the effect is so pleasing that it seems a shame to make the delicate rendering disappear under heavy layers of opaque paint, even though that was the original intention. Oil paintings done transparently have a quality unmatched by other transparent mediums. If they are done with authority, they can more than stand on their own, even when done as a block-in. Therefore, since I am the artist, I can do anything I decide is best—including changing my mind. I sometimes waive my original idea and develop my painting as a purely transparent rendering.

During the time I was first experimenting with this technique, I was also working with Conté crayon. My drawings were done on paper or gesso panels as tonal studies rather than linear renderings. I used solvents such as water, acetone, and denatured alcohol to push the crayon dust around as if it were paint. However, Conté had certain inherent difficulties, mainly with erasure, that oil painting did not have, so it wasn't long before I was trying to imitate the effects of Conté with oil paint. The paint won out and transparent monochrome as a form of finished art is now a familiar part of my repertoire.

The procedure itself is identical with the transparent monochrome block-in discussed above. The difference, of course, is that I don't paint over the transparent work with opaque paint. I retain the block-in and carry it further as a painting itself rather than merely a stage in a painting. I can develop it in great detail, or keep it sketchy, or I can break away from the purely monochrome state and add more color (keeping it transparent of course), until it resembles full color. I can add opaque whites in the last stages to make it resemble a gouache painting (or just to create emphasis), and I can give it the added interest of texture by a light rubbing of sandpaper, or steel wool, or knife scraping. There are endless possibilities for obtaining new effects. If I should botch the job, there is always the reassuring option of rescue by painting over with opaque paint.



"ASPEN GROVE"—Start



"ASPEN GROVE" Oil 22″ × 28″

The impressionistic block-in (left) for this painting is shown slightly beyond the beginning stage. You can see that the upper portion of the group of aspens at left are beginning to receive some serious attention. My goal in this work was to convey the intense blue-green harmony of the forest, and the initial application of those colors is still manifest. They were brushed on as transparent oil paint (thinned with turpentine), but in *color* instead of monochrome. Notice that the temperature relationship within the painting (cool lights, warmer darks) has also been established in the block-in.

I like to work this way whenever a subject has an emphatic harmony that I wish to focus on. Starting out with a full color wash is a way of having my painting sing on key, so to speak, from the beginning. The rest of the painting was a matter of working out the details of drawing, edges, and final value accents.

For me, these simple paintings seem to work best for living subjects or anything else which involves interesting drawing opportunities and subtle tonality (including our flora and fauna chums). The intimate quality of transparent monochrome is perfect for rendering figure drawings and portrait studies, not only because the Conté pigments so closely resemble actual flesh tones, but also because they duplicate the temperature relationship of north daylight—warm darks and cool lights. I have had little luck applying this technique to "scenic" subjects such as landscape, where aerial perspective and atmosphere are important. Monochrome seems very limited in capturing effects caused by complex color changes.

I strongly recommend this way of working for anyone who needs more familiarity with manipulating oil paint. With only one color to worry about (and no mixing), you can concentrate on learning what a brush can do and how to wield it expertly. Without the distraction of color, you will learn it faster, and you will become more aware of the simple value structures in your subject. It is an efficient way to sharpen your drawing ability for when you do tackle full color.

4. IMPRESSIONISTIC BLOCK-IN

This approach became popular during the time of the French Impressionists and remains a favorite with artists today. Landscape painters particularly favor it because it lends itself so well when light and color are the main goals. It is the most unstructured of the ways I start a painting—rather like chasing a rainbow—but it can definitely lead to brilliant effects.

The strategy is to create a color sketch of a subject emphasizing the overall color harmony, while avoiding any definite commitment to exact shapes, edges, and darker values, until something resembling a very loose Impressionist painting is arrived at. When a hazy image of the subject begins to appear, the attention to specific elements is usually developed bit by bit into sharper focus, almost as if someone or something were emerging from a fog.

The process typically begins with an extravagant jumble of colors applied over the entire canvas. There is no immediate attempt at drawing the subject other than a few lines to indicate larger forms. Because of this seemingly random accumulation of paint, there is often no dividing line between the stages of a work. The block-in may have no discernible conclusion as it merges into final painting. The accumulation of bits of color may be so gradual that the whole painting appears to be a single flow from first stroke to signature. A naive observer watching the progress of such a picture might wonder when the serious painting will begin.

In most cases, this way of working is used because the effect of light and the attendant colors are the sole objectives (as they were for Twachtman and Monet). After the color statement has been made, there may be no point in going on. Indeed, there is a belief that the addition of exact drawing or more values will destroy the brilliance of a color effect.

I don't agree with that entirely. I like vivid color, and I think it is possible to retain it regardless of the extent to which a work is developed, provided of course, it is done with virtuosity (consider Sorolla). While I am as captivated as anyone by the stunning works of the Impressionists, I see no reason to confine color to an impressionistic technique. The visual world has many other features—nature herself is filled with precise drawing and edges and values and still manages to radiate more color than any of us can handle, even the Impressionists.

For that reason I regard this broken color system of starting not only as an end in itself, but also as a *means* to an end. It is an ideal method when the subject is so divided into small bits that I cannot resolve it into simple masses—as in landscape painting when I am confronted with a bewildering amount of different colors. Moreover, there is an obvious advantage with an impressionistic block-in when the edges on my subject are indistinct or blurred, or do not lend themselves to clear outline.

In my usual version of this block-in, as in the others, I am usually guided by the conviction that although drawing is no *substitute* for sound painting, it certainly is a *prerequisite*. For that reason, I try to establish the important drawing features after brushing on a turpentine wash of the dominant color—the color "key" that will be the basis of the harmony of my painting. I do the drawing as accurately as I can, without getting involved in minor detail, and staying with pure colors alone.

Accurate drawing normally involves adjustments to achieve desired edges, and that can cause an inadvertent intermixing of colors on the canvas. Extra caution is needed then to keep colors "clean." (A *clean* color is one that clearly belongs to either the red, blue, yellow, orange, green, or violet families.)

It is only when the critical drawing part is well-established that I can relax and decide how many of my nondescript initial strokes of color I wish to change into recognizable *things* in my subject, and which to leave as they are. In other words, I reach a point where I have to ask myself if my painting would be improved in any way by making those dabs of color look like something other than just paint. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), there is no straight answer. This is one of those "Art" parts of painting—a judgment call with no rationale beyond an inward "gut" response about what looks right. I can't say how to choose the right path to follow, but I must tell you that I have created some mediocre paintings by *not* listening to my whimsical impulses.

As you may have already concluded, the tentative nature of this approach means that the likelihood of drawing errors is very high. With only little fragments of color on your canvas, you can't really tell *exactly* where anything is, how big it is, or if it is the right shape—all the things a block-in should tell you! Of course, if you are only interested in color, none of that matters. However, if it *does* matter, and you want your work to be well-drawn, this method demands extra care and considerable ability to visualize your subject within the impressionist maze.

You can do that easily by measuring for the key points on your subject and making marks of some kind on the canvas to give yourself at least the more important references. Obviously your painting probably will require some reworking before everything ends up where it belongs. (Which is why many of the Impressionistic paintings appear so labored when viewed up close.) You need to be especially careful when your subjects are people, because errors in drawing can make your work look absurd. In landscape painting though, you can get away with almost anything provided no one decides to go out and compare it to the actual subject.

All of this aside, the persistent problem throughout every stage of this type of painting is to continually retain the freshness of color that was established at the start. *Color* after all, is the prime reason for choosing this method in the first place. In my experience, retaining clean color until the very end is the hardest task in painting. Sometimes the attempt can produce a dazzling embarrassment—but when it works, it *REALLY* works!



"OCTOBER MORNING" Oil 24″ × 30″



"WILLOWS"—Start



"WILLOWS" Oil 24″ × 48″

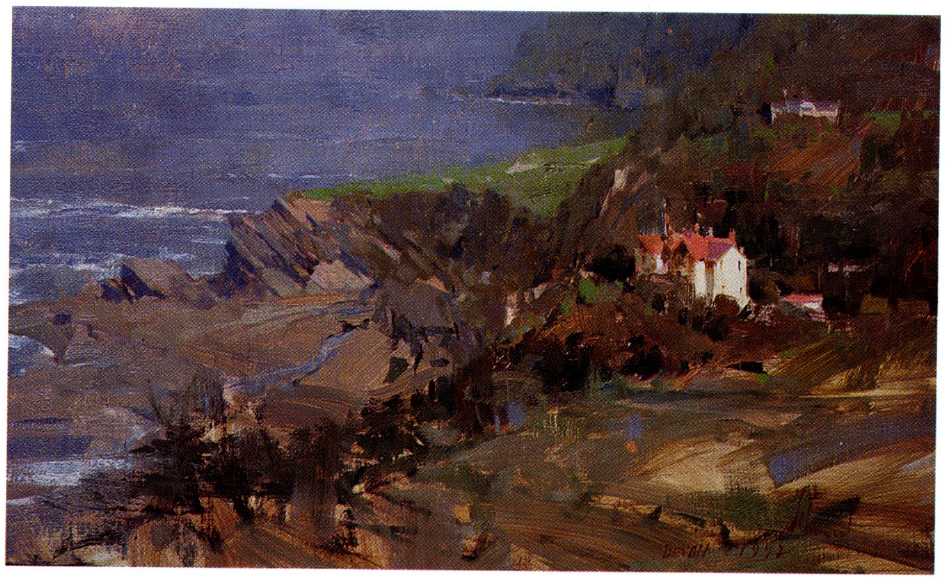
"WILLOWS" was first done as a small study from life and subsequently enlarged to this size as a studio painting. My task in this larger version was to retain the freshness of the color sketch. The block-in is a full color rendering using both transparent and opaque paint thinned with mineral spirits. In the finished version, I ended up with quite a bit more detail than I wanted. The block-in seems stronger for that reason (and it is closer to my original color sketch). I mention this not as an apology (it's still a nice painting), but to point out how very fragile that thing is that we capture in painting from life.

5. FULL COLOR ACCURATE BLOCK-IN

I prefer this and the following starting method because both are ways to practically finish a painting from the start. If I am careful, there will be very little correcting or overpainting of my initial work. All I need to get started is a tone applied as a wash over my canvas—usually a subdued shade of the general color harmony of the subject—then I can lay on the correct colors and values of the larger masses immediately. There is no trying this or that or fooling with approximations. I select a prominent shape and paint it as correctly and as *completely* as I can with its true value, color, and edges. An adjoining shape is done in the same way, then the one that borders those two, and so on until all the remaining major shapes have been painted with their appropriate edges. If all goes well, if I manage to sustain my effort without a major blunder, the result will be a full color block-in, true to the subject in every respect except minor details. That, at least, is my hope.

The only concession to approximation I make is to sometimes (but not always) hold back on the thickness of my paint. Generally, I use my pigments spread thinly at first, using larger flat bristle brushes. Then when the block-in is finished, it is easy for me to go in and apply paint of any desired thickness (within reason) to achieve my textural effects. By keeping my paint to a minimum at first, I will have a choice of making those effects either very complex or quite simple. In working out the fine points, however, I have to be wary of losing the strength of the simple masses of the block-in. To prevent this, I must always ask myself if it is clearly necessary to divide those large shapes. If not, I leave them alone. If I decide that subdividing or developing detail is essential, I make every effort to do so without altering the overall value of the area. Maintaining the *one original value* of the simple masses is the key to keeping them strong. Excessive modeling with value changes in the lights and shadows will undermine the design structure in any painting. I use color changes instead.

A view overlooking the Bristol Channel and the Irish Sea—painted in 1992 during a trip through Devon in southern England. I had to contend with bright sunlight on my canvas and palette, which caused me to mix my colors a bit darker, and that resulted in this somewhat more mellow sunlight effect.



"LYNMOUTH BAY"
Oil 12″ × 20″



"EXETER COTTAGE"—Start



"EXETER COTTAGE"—Half finished

In this painting I bypassed most of the customary preliminaries and started blocking-in immediately with accurate drawing, color, values, and edges (but not necessarily small detail). The mist of England's serene Devon countryside provided me with ready-made soft edges. The clear white value of the house in the center made a perfect pattern for my design, and the architectural features of the structure gave me the classic shapes (drawing elements) and simple values that I needed. The cottage in that misty field presented itself as a perfect picture waiting to be painted.

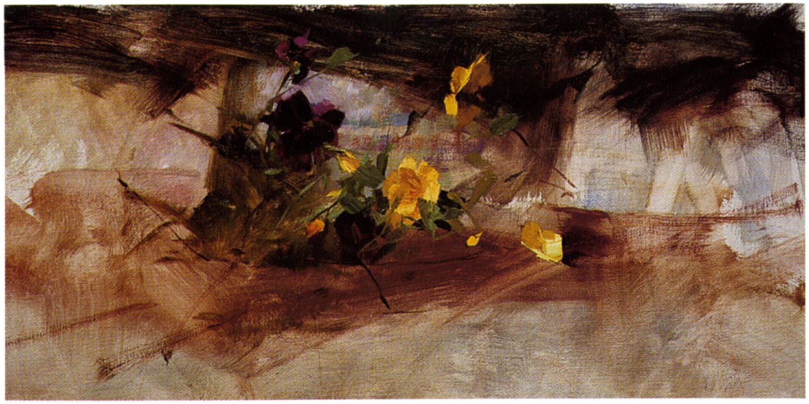
There was very little I had to figure out or change. I began in the center with the larger shapes of the building, and worked outwards, finishing as I went along. I realize now that I should have quit sooner than I did. In fact, if I had to do it over again, I would probably render the foreground with less detail.

One of the most frustrating, but genuine truths I have learned in my 50 years at painting is this—**that beyond a given point, usually just past the block-in, most additional work tends to weaken the strength of my painting.** That clear fact argues soundly for getting it right at the start.

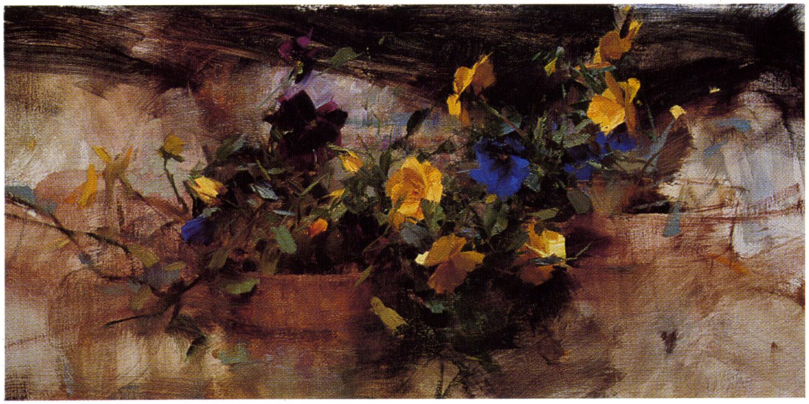


"EXETER COTTAGE" Oil 24″ × 40″

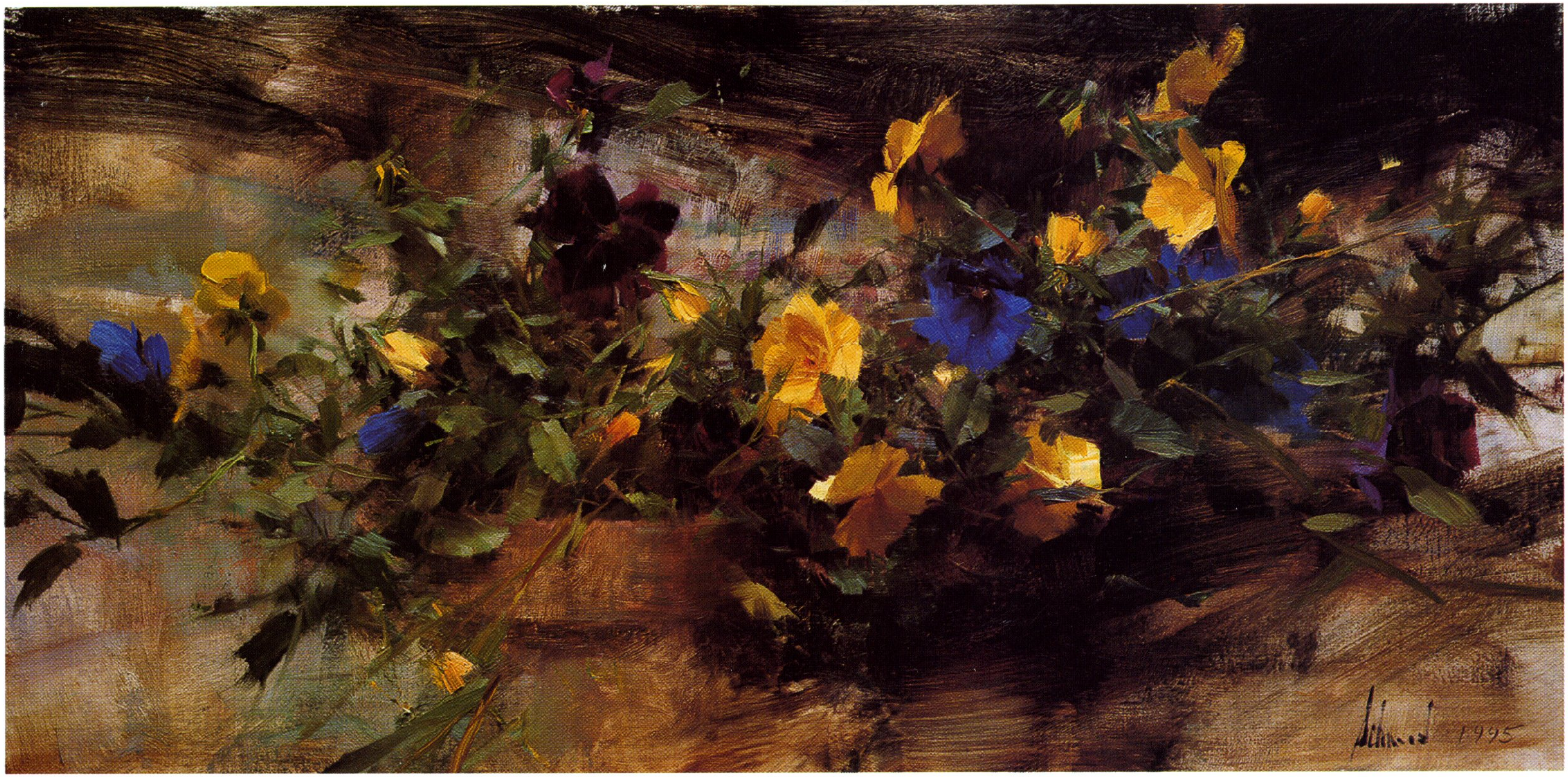
The only difference between this and the following method is that here I am concerned at the start with the *larger shapes* of the subject at the beginning, while in the next I go after everything including detail. Both of these very direct approaches are vulnerable to error, because there is little preliminary work to rely upon. I must be very careful with each stroke I apply, because the next one depends on its accuracy. Obviously this way of starting will not do for large complex compositions. It works only when the subject is relatively simple—something that can be easily visualized and requires minimum preliminary work.



"PANSIES"—Step one



"PANSIES"—Step two



"PANSIES" Oil 12″ × 24″ Note in these three steps how little the initial applications of paint change from start to finish.

6. SELECTIVE START

I did not learn this one in school. Like most students, I was taught various effective ways to approach my subject that would allow me to deal with the intricacies of a subject in digestible steps. Tackling everything at one time was assumed to be asking for trouble. A number of years ago I asked myself why. Why was it necessary to paint something *almost* right—and then correct it? I wondered why I had to wait for the subsequent stages of a painting to deal with all the elements in the subject? Why couldn't the first strokes of a painting be correct in drawing and complete, with edges, value, and color, and be identical with what I saw on my subject? Why couldn't the second stroke also be like that? And the third? And so on.

The answer was—*no reason at all!* If I could see the colors and shapes of a subject well-enough to correct them, then I could also get them right the *first* time, and thus eliminate the almost-right stage! All I had to do was be *very* picky about how I looked at my subject, and what went on my canvas.

So now whenever it is possible, I try to paint each little shape on my subject as carefully as I can from the start. I do it in as finished a way as possible, and I use each correct color shape to guide me in painting all adjoining shapes. I build my picture in this way from a single accurate point, painting outward from that center, until I have the painting I want before me. After that, it is a matter of pulling the whole thing together—mopping up so to speak—softening edges here and there, scrutinizing it for drawing errors (most often mistakes in alignment), eliminating unnecessary value changes, and checking the overall design for simplicity. Then I'm done.

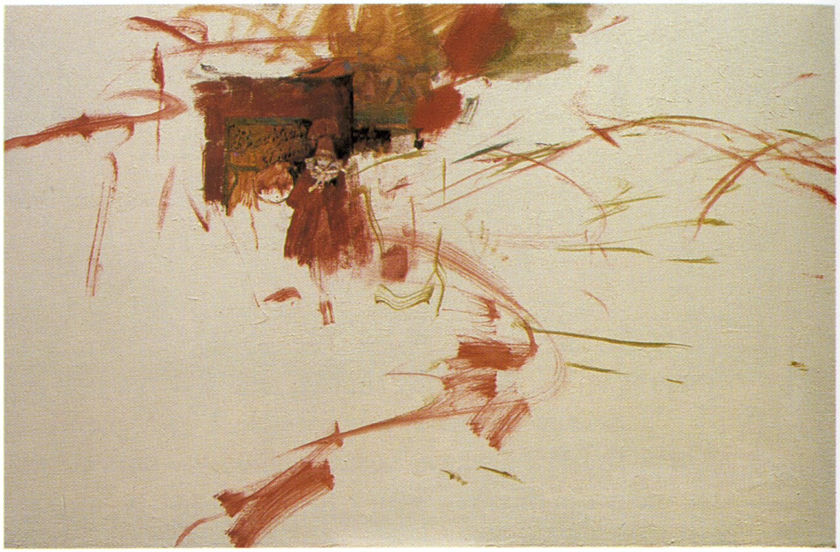
This is a detail of the central portion of a nearly life-size painting. The scene included a sofa, chairs, windows, flowers, and many other objects. Rather than blocking-in everything at the start, I began with an almost finished rendering of Nancy, and then added the surrounding elements as I came to them. My work was made easier because I had done a small color sketch beforehand.



"NANCY" Oil 32″ × 44″ (Detail)



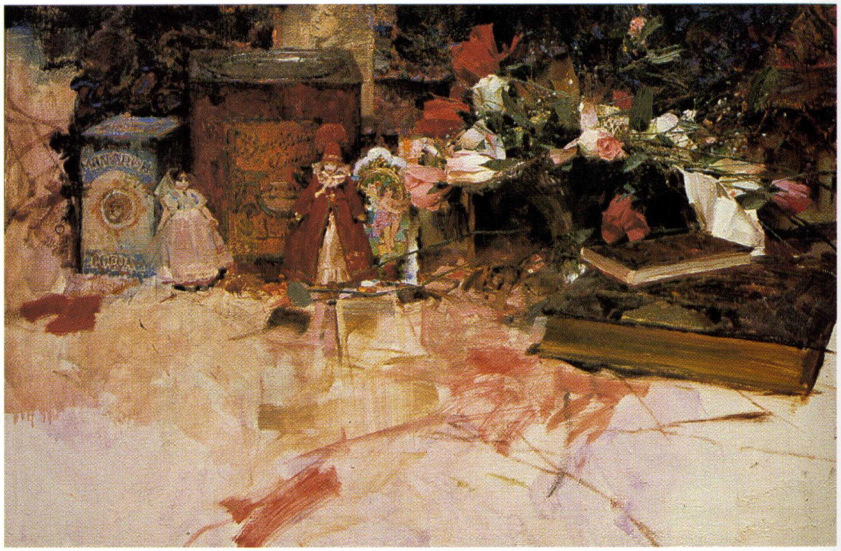
"RUSSIAN DOLL"—Step one



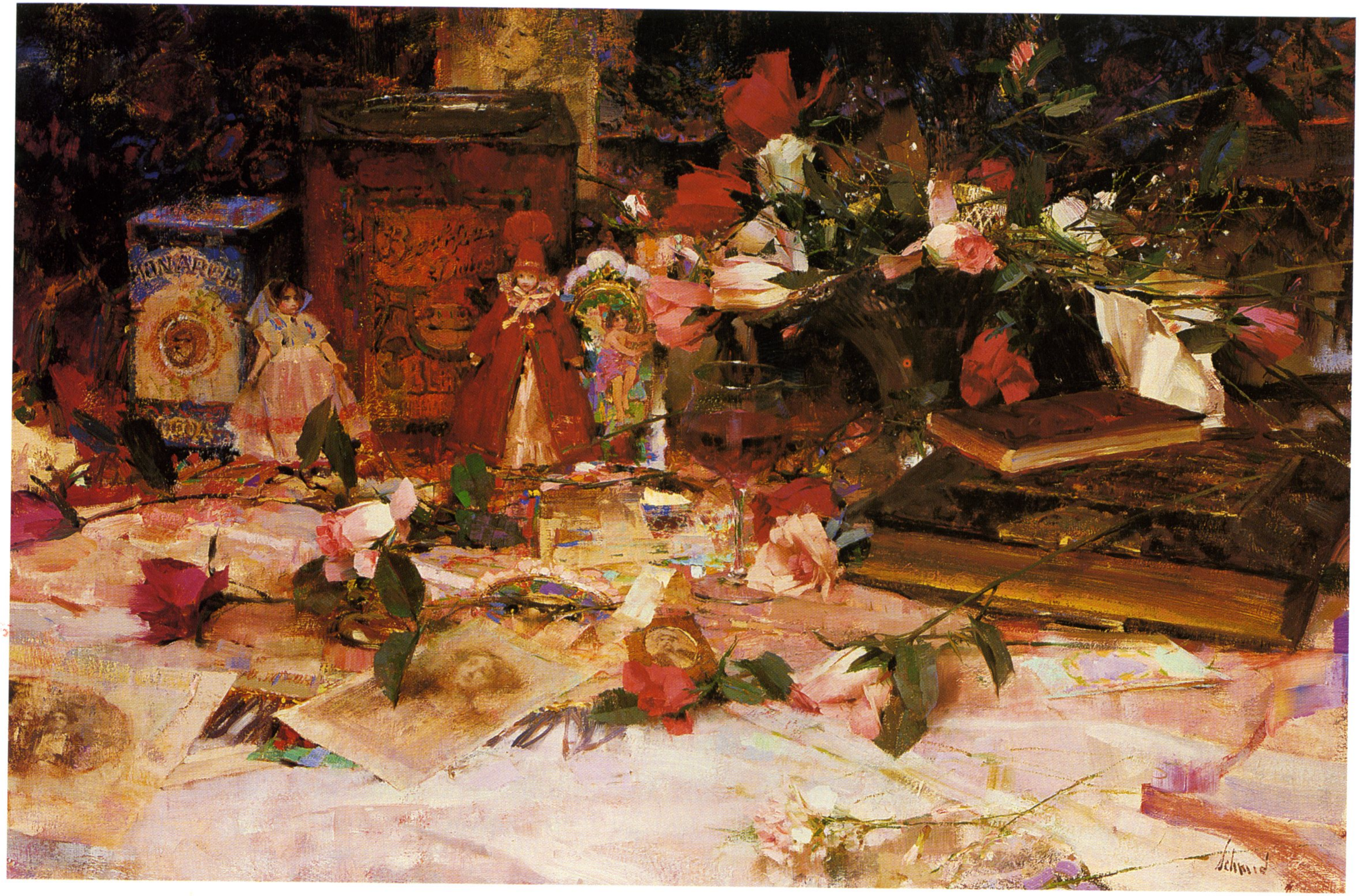
"RUSSIAN DOLL"—Step two



"RUSSIAN DOLL"—Step three



"RUSSIAN DOLL"—Step four



"RUSSIAN DOLL" Oil 20″ × 30″

This way of working cannot be done casually. It calls for the utmost in concentration, but it is definitely worth the effort, or at the very least, it is something to shoot for. It is hard to exaggerate the advantages of having a variety of starting techniques at your disposal. Unquestionably, a flexible response to the demands of subject matter and conditions is better than having a single individualistic style of working, however satisfying that may be to the ego. Fidelity to your perception of a subject is the whole point of working from life. You ought to paint what you see. Real life, whether it's a landscape, or a person, or still life, presents an incomparable visual banquet, and capturing it faithfully the way you see it can be a stunning experience. To diminish that by subordinating it to a safe and set routine that everyone can recognize as yours makes no sense, and it's no fun either.



"BARANOF FALLS" (Alaska) Oil 24″ × 48″

"BARANOF FALLS" evolved from several smaller paintings done on location in southeast Alaska. I have done larger landscapes from life, mostly when I was younger, stronger, and innocently fearless. However, rain, wind, cold, and the possibility of being eaten, persuaded me to paint something small, quickly, and get the hell back on the boat. The presence of large nasty grizzly bears in the neighborhood had a way of focusing my attention to essentials—getting the important colors correctly so that I could do this painting in my studio. This rendering is far more detailed than I normally do in the field, but that tends to happen when there is unlimited working time. The way to get around this is simply to set the same time limit in my studio as I would have working from life, and perhaps hire someone to put on a bear costume and spray me with cold water as I paint.

THE AESTHETICS OF STARTING

Up to this point, my comments have been mostly about the technical aspects of starting—how the visual problems in a subject are tangibly perceived and ways to approach them. All of that is very necessary of course, but before "Art" can happen you must answer the most fundamental question in starting:

WHY **ARE YOU GOING TO DO IT?**

Having the answer to this is essential. Painting, after all, isn't like mountain climbing. You don't do it just because the subject is *there*. The beginning is the time when you should bring to full awareness your perceptions and feelings toward the subject, and then make up your mind about what you intend to convey.

It might be a certain color effect, or atmospheric mood, or a facial expression. It might be something internally evocative, such as a memory, or emotion, or something philosophical or spiritual. It could be a social message, or even (God forbid) political or financial. It is your choice and you must make it.

Whatever it is—nail it! Fix it in your mind as the one thing above all else that must be captured. I said earlier that this doesn't come in paint tubes, and that is true, but your poetic destination must hover over your purely *technical* efforts like a nagging guardian angel, prodding you to not forget the song you are singing. Use your vision to set up your subject, or choose vantage points, and then guide the emphasis in your work so that your idea comes through clearly and unmistakably from your heart. Within the bounds of fidelity to the subject, there is endless latitude for self-expression in accomplishing that.

Even when you have no choice about the subject, if you are a student in an art class, for example, and the instructor picks the model and sets the pose, there is richness to be found because it rests *not in the subject* but in the way you *experience* your subject. Surely there will always be *something* in you that responds in a human way—something that resonates with the subject (even if it is negative). Look within yourself and find out what it is. (If you draw a blank, check to see if you are still breathing.)

Remember—*you* and your mind are ultimately the real subject of your art regardless of what you paint!

Do not ask yourself, "***What*** do I see?" Rather ask, "What do ***I*** see?"

CHAPTER FOUR—DRAWING

There is a popular notion that artists are born with an ability to draw, but that isn't true. The *impulse* to draw is there, but no one arrives in this world endowed with the capacity to graphically depict visual reality. I have never known of a painter who was just "naturally" good at it and could do it without serious training.[1] Drawing is a skill that must be learned, but it isn't like swimming or riding a bike. Once you get the knack of it, you can't relax and just let it happen by itself. It takes constant practice and presence of mind. Why? Because it is not a physical skill, it is a mental discipline. It deals with continual variables rather than the repetition of memorized shapes. I always have the fond hope that someday it will get easier, but it never does. Sound drawing always demands great care right down to the last dab in a painting.

DRAWING IN THE CONTEXT OF PAINTING

For most of us, the word "drawing" brings to mind an outline of something. This deeply ingrained assumption originates in childhood when we learned to use lines to make pictures. Yet in real life there are no lines around things. Line drawing is only a representation or diagram of our visual world. Painting, on the other hand (the kind I am dealing with here), attempts to create an illusion of that world.[2] Consequently, in this discussion when I use the word "drawing," I mean the *size, shape, and arrangement* of all the patches of color that collectively make things look the way they do (and which also constitute a painting). When you render those patches the right size, the right shape, and with their distinctive edges and color, your painting will look like your subject. If you don't—*it* won't. It will look different. Therefore, I use the words drawing and painting to mean the *same* thing.

WHY IS DRAWING SO HARD?

It shouldn't be. After all, drawing is simply measuring. As it applies to Direct painting from life, drawing comes down to nothing more than figuring out the width and height of color shapes and then fitting them together. Still, drawing remains very difficult for nearly everyone, which is odd when you think about it because drawing is the only visual element we work with that seems to deal with a measurable and definable aspect of the visible world. The other three elements: color, value, and edges, are *relative* qualities with generous room for interpretation. Drawing is about *specific* dimensions.

If a nose in your painting is "out of drawing," it is either too big, too small, the wrong shape, or it doesn't fit correctly with the other facial features. All of those are measurable qualities, and even non-artists know how to use a ruler.

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1 As a kid growing up during World War II, I remember trying in vain to draw pictures of Japanese fighter planes, but sadly, their wings always turned out looking like Dumbo's ears.

2 Line drawing by itself is a separate art form with great expressive power. I do not mean to dismiss it as being in any way inferior to painting. My point in the text is that the word "drawing" as it applies to painting refers to the dimensions and relationships of elements in a rendering, not to the art of linear representation. All forms of art have their strengths and limitations. One is not better than another, but each does certain things better than any other.



Careful drawing need not result in "tight" or excessively detailed work. On the contrary. As this little painting shows, drawing well gives me freedom to play with interesting brushwork as much as I please. Control through fine drawing is the key. **"Looseness," as I am fond of pointing out, should be the way a painting appears, not how it is accomplished.**

"GIRL IN A WHITE DRESS"
Oil 16″ × 12″



Men are easy to paint, especially men who have beards, rugged features, and angularity of facial structure. Such things are not only easy to grasp (and therefore easy to get right, but they lend themselves to bold brushstrokes, which are always nice.

The other thing about beards (and hats or other coverings) is that they hide some of the hard parts. In painting a head, I have always found the line of the jaw, the mouth, and the chin to be the most troublesome anatomical features. Eyes and noses are no problem for me because they have so many easy-to-see shapes. Also, there is no movement in the nose, and very little in eyes.

Contrary to popular belief, it is the mouth, not the eyes, that conveys the majority of facial expression, which is why the slightest error in painting a a mouth can cause my result to look ridiculous. The jaw and chin are tricky because their forms are so subtle and abstract. A beard and mustache neatly veils all of these sensitive areas. All of that hair also provides opportunities for interesting edges. Note also in this head study that there are two distinct light sources—a warm one on the model's left, and a cool one on his right.

"BANDEAU"
Oil 24″ × 18″

You would think, therefore, that drawing could be nailed down exactly, that it would be almost mathematical, but as we all know it doesn't quite work out that way. Theoretically at least, all things visible as well as many that are invisible (empty space, for example) can be measured with precision. Well, almost everything. Fog and mist, whipped cream, flying birds, squirmy little children, crashing waves, and other such things *are* a bit hard to pin down. On the other hand, trees, mountains, grown-up people who sit still, and potted plants all have very definite sizes and shapes that present us with measurable dimensions—but we still miss the mark.

Let me assume (hypothetically of course) that I have difficulty with drawing—my pictures are coming out crooked and all funny looking, and my portraits look like people who have had terrible head injuries. Why can't I get my drawing right? Am I blind to my mistakes or what? Certainly when I looked into my bathroom mirror this morning I could tell if my nose was longer than it was yesterday, or if my eyes were more lopsided than usual, or if my ears were on straight! Yes, of course I could! If my eye was even a millimeter askew I'd notice and be off in a panic to the emergency room. Why then did I not catch those similar errors in that last portrait I attempted?

The reason has to do with more than my familiarity with my own features, because I would probably make the same blunders if I tried a self-portrait. So what is the problem? Why, if almost every shape can be measured, is drawing so tricky? Why can some people see that their picture is "out of drawing," but cannot see where the mistakes are? Why are others not even *aware* that their drawing is wrong—that it does not even look like their subject?

THE PROBLEM

To begin with, I don't have to construct my face in the mirror each morning the way I do for a portrait. My face is already there—complete and quite handsome too—and I simply *recognize* it (backwards, no less). I am not conscious of the specific relationships and dimensions—the things I must figure out from scratch when I do a painting. It is the job of determining those exact measurements and alignments that is so taxing.

One reason it is hard to make those measurements, and then make them fit together just so, is that I must measure the shapes of color that make up my features rather than the features themselves. To make matters worse, those shapes change with the light and angle of view. Each time I do a painting, I am dealing with a fresh set of configurations to untangle. As if all of that were not enough, many of the shapes I see have edges so diffuse that figuring out where each one stops and another begins can often seem impossible. (It isn't, however, those soft transitions are called edges, and I discuss them at length in Chapter 5.)

Little in our early learning and development prepares us for this task. Knowledge is wonderful, but some of what we are taught can make the job harder because of what we must *un-learn.* In infancy we rely heavily upon our sense of touch and sight to explain the world around us. At the same time we receive names for things and are thus categorizing our curious new world. At a certain point in middle childhood, when we begin to draw recognizable things, we separate and delineate them with outlines. Later on in art school, this preoccupation with form expressed as outline is reinforced as we learn to model with shading—further isolating objects in space.

We are then taught about basic forms—cubes, cylinders, spheres, human form, foregrounds, backgrounds, perspective and so on. It is all good information of course (the technical core of Western Art until the 17th century). However, as useful as they are, all of those studies are simply ways to sort out the visual world into easily understood parts.[3] It isn't until we get into painting that we finally confront the more sophisticated realities of vision. Our task then is to restore the original complex web that was so carefully dissected. To do that convincingly we must deal with the actual information reaching our retinas—and *that* is what drawing is, as it applies to painting.

THE VISUAL FIELD

What we are literally seeing when our eyes are open is a two-dimensional panorama of the world immediately in front of us, plus a bit of peripheral vision. Two slightly different inverted images spaced about two and one half inches apart are received on our retinas. Those images are then processed in our brain to give us a three-dimensional-right-side-up version of the world, and we do all of that at nearly the speed of light. What a trick! Learning to draw seems like child's play by comparison (but it isn't).

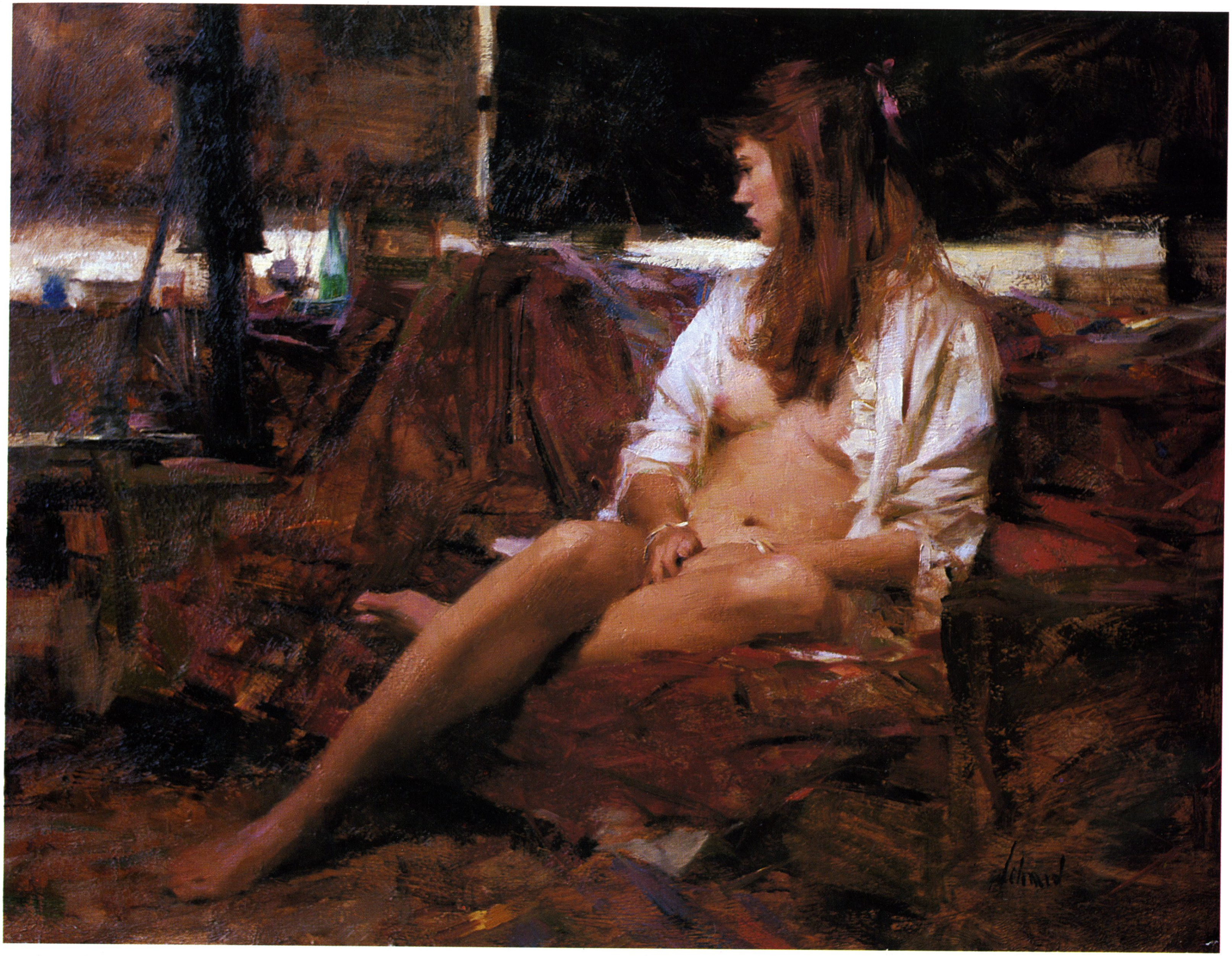
Normally, as we gaze out across a scene we automatically separate objects in our field of vision from the space around them; then we organize the whole scene in terms of sizes, shapes, local colors, and distances. The sky is big and empty, the barn is nearer and red and not so big, the cows are tiny and far away and black and brown, and so on. That is how we are able to make sense of the blizzard of light fragments striking our eyes. We recognize and identify patterns we are familiar with, and we give them names and colors and shapes. Then we put all of them together and call it a farm under a summer sky. Seeing the world this way is a marvelous thing indeed, a triumph of evolution, vital to our survival, and great to have in Los Angeles traffic, but a bit of a hindrance in painting from life.

When we paint, we must transform our three-dimensional experience back into two dimensions so we can put it on our two-dimensional canvas. *That* means we must view what we are seeing as a flat arrangement of shapes, *not* an assortment of items separated from one another in space. We must see the interlocking abstract shapes that together form recognizable images. It is the same thing seen in paint-by-number kits or billboard painting.

For example, the sky in a landscape does not continue behind an object. The background is simply a color shape that stops at the edge of another color shape then reappears as a new shape at the opposite edge. It may sound simplistic to mention something so obvious, but in practice it is not so easy to view the poignant look in a child's eyes as merely flat patches of color. It simply goes contrary to the emotional logic of experience. Moreover, it is not easy to identify shapes when they have indistinct edges and blend into other shapes. Nevertheless, that is what must be done, because painting the innocence in a child's expression is impossible, but painting the pattern of colors that create the expression *is* possible.

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3 It is analogous to taking apart my computer to understand how it works—a sensible idea for learning—but when the bits and pieces are spread about, they don't look like the computer anymore. It is only *after* I have examined the parts, then reassembled them and turned it on, that I can understand the "wholeness" of the machine.



"NUDE" Oil 14″ × 18″

In a quick study like this, a knowledge of anatomy, particularly proportions, is essential. There is seldom margin for error in figure painting. All the bumps and hollows and appendages must look right. Besides, if a lady is going to be nice enough to remove her clothes and sit for me, the least I can do is paint her splendidly.

MEASURING

It is hard for me to imagine any other choice but to draw those color fragments and let go of what I know about *what* they are. The question is how to see the shapes accurately and fit them together properly. It took practice, but now I see them. I am able to paint the shapes accurately because I have disciplined myself to do them one at a time very carefully. I measure the first thing I put down on my canvas and make sure it is precisely correct, then I measure the next shape and compare it to the first one. I do the third shape and check it against the first two, then the fourth measured against the first three, and I keep doing that until I have the cow under the summer sky.

I know it may seem rather tedious, and it certainly doesn't have the flair of the usual swashbuckling sketching associated with starting a painting, but what it lacks in swagger it makes up for in superb control. It all but eliminates laborious correcting and repainting, and that appeals to me. I think it is a waste of valuable painting time to spend it rectifying what could have been done right in the first place.

Q. How do I paint my first shape exact?
A. I choose a shape that is easy to grasp so I can't miss.

Q. Which shapes are easy to see?
A. The obvious ones.

Q. Which ones are obvious?
A. Shapes that have clear geometry—squares, circles, rectangles, triangles, shapes with straight lines and clear edges, etc. I try to use shapes that also have strong values or colors. (That is why they are obvious.) Usually I go for a shape that is clearly a rectangle or triangle, that is also very dark, or very light, and has a bright pure color. Those qualities are easy to see.

I do *anything* necessary to get my judgments right. I sometimes go up to the subject (if there is no other way) and physically measure the shape I need. That only works in painting life-size, and it is not a good habit. First, because it is unnecessary, and second, because very few things in a subject can be measured and still correspond to what I see from the point at which I am painting. I find it much easier to paint one element the size I want it to be, and then match everything else to it. In landscape painting there is no other choice. (Remember I am referring here to working from life. Painting from photographs is altogether different.)

The "trick" in measuring shapes and intervals is to select one or the other as a unit of measure. (Rather than using inches or metrics, or relying on memorized proportions.) In doing a head, for example, I use the width of an eye, or the distance between the eyes, or the width between corners of the mouth. These features have clear boundaries or points of beginning and end, which make them easy to pin down. Because they are also short increments, I am more likely to get them correct than if I use a longer unit of measurement—it is easier to judge the distance between eyes than between ears.



Normally, I don't use this much line drawing at the start of painting a head, but the lines, particularly of the hat and face beckoned me. The result at this stage was so pleasing that Nancy (again) made me stop.

This modest sketch is a constant reminder to me of how, beneath the surfaces of many paintings (and lost unless photographed), lie beautiful stages of the work. Imagine how wonderful it would be to see a Rembrandt or Vermeer in their preliminary stages. It is our good fortune that many have left us their drawings and studies for paintings.

"CHEYENNE COWBOY"
Oil 20″ × 16″

DANGEROUS CURVES

The outlines of contours present problems for many artists, particularly in figure or portrait painting. Here are some things to think about: Most curves are rarely as "curvy" as they first appear, and inexperienced artists usually exaggerate them. For example, an overly-rounded cheekbone is the most common drawing mistake in painting a head. Another frequent error is drawing the skull or outline of the head as a single unbroken curve (it isn't). The way to get around curves (pardon the pun) is to think of every curve as a series of *straight* lines that change direction. If you paint them with that in mind, they will be stronger, more interesting, and far more accurate than a single nondescript curve.

Finding the key drawing points in a subject and then fitting the pieces together is not intellectually demanding, but it does call for patience and discipline. It is like laying bricks plumb and level—very repetitious, but very demanding of concentration. Using the front view of a head again as an example: An imaginary line drawn straight down from the inside corner of the eye will usually just touch the wing of the nostril. A similar line dropped from the center of the eye could locate the corner of the mouth. Using my measuring units then (the width of an eye, shall we say), I only have to judge the distance down those lines to place the nose and mouth in correct relationship to the eyes. Likewise, imaginary horizontal lines drawn from the nose and eye corners will tell me exactly where the ears are.

DON'T BLAME THE SITTER

Unfortunately, that does not work if a model moves. Live human beings like to breathe, blink, yawn, talk, stretch, and everything else when they pose. I can't sit still for more than a few minutes so I'm amazed and grateful that others are willing to endure modeling. Most people are able to hold a pose well enough for my way of working because I always expect them to move somewhat. I am also very nice to my subjects. I like them bright, alert, comfortable, relaxed, and interested in what is happening. I think it is unnatural to stay in a fixed position, so I encourage my models to take breaks or move whenever they wish. I pose them so they will feel natural—my only requirement is that they be able to return to their position if they drift off or take a break.

To accommodate their inevitable movement, I rely upon contour and center lines to guide me (like the latitude and longitude lines on a globe). You are probably familiar with drawing books that picture the head as an egg with a line down the front and back (dividing an imagined face in two lengthwise). Another line is drawn down the sides (for the ears), and then several horizontal lines circumscribing the egg at the level of eyebrows, eyes, bottom of the nose, and center of the lips. I find contour lines such as those useful, and once I place them I do not change them. They remain as a constant guide and as a reference to bring a subject back into position.[4] You can see how important it is then to have the first thing right, and how that, in turn, generates other correct elements.

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4 There are various other systems for drawing, but the practical ones all use some method of coordinates to establish salient points and then verify them. Line drawing methods such as Contour drawing, gesture drawing, and quick sketching, probably have some value as exercises, but they are not applicable to the kind of drawing that I am dealing with here.



"DOCTOR ROGER" Oil 18″ × 24″

A portrait of Doctor Roger Lacy, professor of psychiatry at the University of Alabama (and my son-in law). I like to paint him at regular intervals because Roger is fond of changing his appearance from full beard and long hair to this, and everything in between. I'm not sure how his patients handle the transformations, but I find them challenging.

IT ISN'T ALL DRUDGERY

I realize that what I have just described sounds more like high school geometry than the sensitive act of creation, but I don't see any way around it. I *must* measure things because drawing is very hard for me. I do not have a special gift that allows me to do it naturally. Of course, measuring in itself isn't Art any more than scales and chords alone are Music. However, like those things, sound drawing is a technical *requisite* that must be present before Art (this kind) can happen. Besides, there is no reason why a brushstroke can't be done with giddy passion and still be the right length and color! I love throwing paint around as much as you, and the last thing I want to do is take the fun out of painting.

The good news is that measuring, by itself, even the vague fuzzy shapes, gets easier with practice. The hard part is getting into the habit of doing it for every shape you paint. *That* takes real effort, but once you acquire it, you will experience a remarkable sense of freedom and control. Nothing will seem impossible when you realize that you can draw expertly—all you have to do is get into the habit of measuring very carefully all the time. That discipline will let your brush dance and fly in the same way that virtuoso bowing technique makes a violin sing.[5]

THE PAINLESS WAY

You can make it easier if you keep doing the simple, obvious things first. That way you are likely to get them right, and they will help you to make the proper judgments about the more elusive shapes and colors. Resist the urge to do the hard parts first. (Those blurry grays and ambiguous shapes with lost edges.) For a long time I had this all backwards! I thought exactly the opposite—that I should get the hard stuff out of the way so I could relax and enjoy the easy things. Sounds familiar doesn't it? (Rather like dessert after the main course—a little reward after the tough part.)

It took years before it dawned on me to use the *easy* things to get the *hard* things—to use what is *known* to find what is *unknown*—the same beautiful idea that works so well in logic and mathematics. That idea should work for you too. Select something *easy* to see in your subject—a straight line, a square or triangle, something you can't miss—and paint that first! You are bound to get those things right, and you will be on track immediately. Painting from one correct thing to another gives you a powerful control over the process.

With correct things on your canvas, mistakes show up clearly because they stick out conspicuously amid the accurate work. You can easily see then where to make corrections, and the "right" stuff already in your picture will tell you how to fix them. Without correct work on your canvas, you can never determine if what you are putting down is right or wrong because there is nothing accurately painted to compare it to.

The momentum of this kind of painting is a remarkable experience, and it is within the reach of anyone with the patience to always be very very careful.

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5 Imagine that you are a mountain climber making your way up the face of a sheer cliff, and you must think and measure before each step—or else. Does being careful like that make climbing less exciting?

I plan to go into drawing techniques such as this in more detail in a future book, but let me describe how this drawing was done. My surface was a 1/4" untempered masonite panel primed with acrylic gesso, applied with a broad flat bristle brush to provide a slight texture. With the panel laying flat, I dusted the surface lightly with powdered charcoal, and a bit of sanguine and brown pastel crayon (being very careful not to rub it into the gesso). I then placed the panel vertically (upright) on my easel, which allowed the excess pastel and charcoal to fall off. That done, I was ready to start drawing.

The work was done with extra soft charcoal pencils, soft willow charcoal sticks and a variety of sharpened pastel crayons in various red and brown earth colors. The light areas were created with a small kneaded rubber eraser, fine sandpaper, steel wool, and a wet cotton rag—sounds pretty crude, doesn't it?

However, look at the drawing carefully; use a magnifying glass if necessary, and see how delicate the effects are. Note the area at bottom center where I pressed a cutting of dampened lace to the surface. (No, that's not cheating.) Also notice places in the hair and background where I used a bristle brush and water to both apply and remove pigment.

This drawing was done in 1970 when I was exploring the many possibilities of charcoal and pastel aggregates. Since then, however, I have developed ways to exactly duplicate the appearance of these techniques on a white lead ground using oil paint alone.



"FELICE"
Charcoal and Conté
22″ × 18″ (Detail)

CHAPTER FIVE—VALUES

WHAT ARE VALUES?

The term "values" refers to the range of lightness and darkness within a subject, as well as the tones from white to black in a painting. White paint is as light as we can attain in a picture; black or its equivalent is the darkest. Most painters employ the familiar grouping of nine values—four in the light, with white as the lightest, four in the dark to black, and one in between. This is called the *value scale*. This segmenting of the scale into nine increments is practical because more than that seems cumbersome, and less is not enough. In any case, no matter how many slices we create, the range is still from white to black. Compared to the many values in nature, these nine aren't much, but they are all we have to work with, so we must use them thoughtfully.[1]

THE TRADE-OFF

Because we have so few values to work with, we must often settle for capturing the *effect* of light rather than attempting literal renderings. The key to doing this is the use of *CONTRAST.* Contrast is, after all, the thing that permits us to discriminate one thing from another. Without it the world would be as invisible as a white rabbit in the snow. The *degree of contrast* within a painting determines how bright or how faint the effect of light will appear in a picture.

For example, a favorite device to represent bright light in Impressionistic paintings is to *raise* the values of the darks. However, that doesn't always succeed because it reduces the contrast. Bright clear sunlight always produces *some* strong dark shadows, *increasing* contrast to the limit. That is why sunshine looks like sunshine, and why some paintings that *lack* that degree of contrast fail to depict sunlight. Many high-key Impressionistic paintings look bright and sunny in galleries or museums only because of the contrast with their picture frames or the walls on which they hang.

The *chiaroscuro* specialists went the other way—*increasing* contrast. In many of their works the darks constitute the majority area. That is not a bad way to represent empty space, except that it's boring, and there is a problem with glare in viewing such canvases, plus a loss of the "emptiness" effect when dust gets on the canvas surface.[2] The blackness we normally encounter in everyday life isn't black anyway; it is just a lot of dark colors—but colors nonetheless. Therefore, when you see what looks like black in your subject, paint it with mixtures of Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine Blue, and Transparent Oxide Red (or other similar pigments).

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1 Mosby straightened me out right away about values with jokes about how Van Gogh cut off his ear and then shot himself because he couldn't paint the sun. It wasn't exactly true, but it got my attention.

2 I'm not a big fan of vacant blackness. It reminds me too much of death. Besides, I can achieve blackness anytime just by closing my eyes. The use of blank darkness can also be a tempting way to obscure things that may be difficult to paint. I suspect that a few great masters had awkward problems with the subtle colors within shadows and resorted to the device of blackness as a way out. Because they painted so well in the light areas, the black areas were probably ignored. At any rate blackness still remains a popular gimmick, particularly with painters who work from photos.

DAZZLE

We can achieve astonishing imitations of light by the resourceful juxtaposition of values. For example, increasing the contrast between two values not only magnifies the distinction between them, but it also intensifies the smaller of the two—that small white rabbit will look even whiter against a large background of black. Values can also be manipulated to *lessen* contrast. By choosing only a limited portion of the value scale in the majority area of a painting, various moods or subtleties of atmosphere can be created. This is known as working in a *value key.*

To illustrate: A picture that contains only white plus its neighboring three or four values is considered a *high-key* painting. One that uses only the darker end of the scale is described as *low-keyed.* Often the key can be deliberately violated somewhere in the painting with a value above or below the key as an attention getting device. A pure white or bright color injected into a low-key painting is a familiar example. One caution however—when you are deliberately creating a painting in a value key, don't go overboard with these little "eye-catchers." There is a very thin line between the perfect accent and vulgarity.

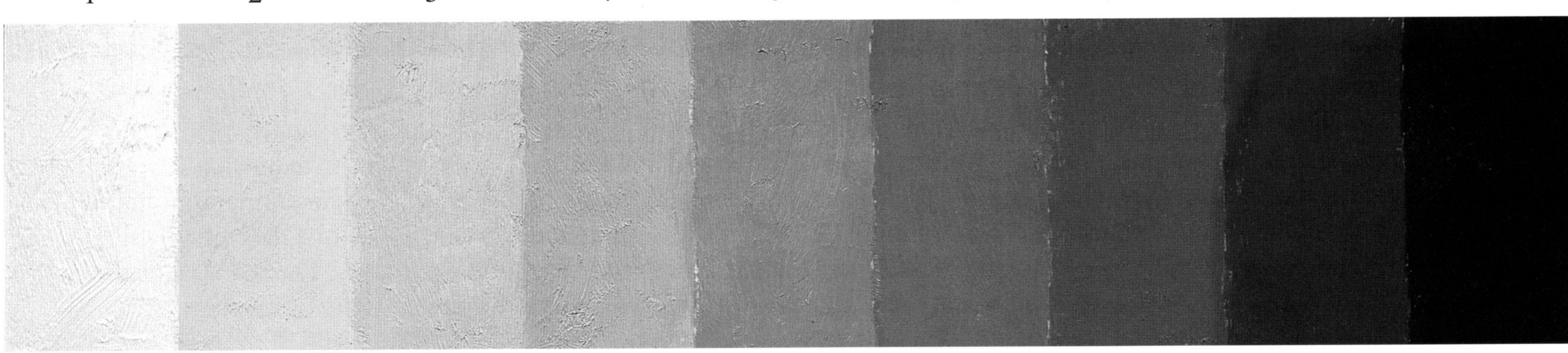
So what do I know thus far?—I know that I can't reproduce light itself with my limited materials, that contrast makes things visible, and that I can separate values into nine neat little jumps. But what about the actual business of painting?

1. How do I make sense of the jumble of lights and shadows and other tones in my subject?
2. How can I see values clearly in my subject?
3. How do I pick out the "right" ones to use?
4. How can I paint pictures that are strong and simple in value?

Questions one and two are really the same (the second answers the first)—I sort out the jumble of values in a subject by seeing them *clearly*. How can I see them clearly? By *simplifying* them. How do I simplify them?—by *squinting* at them! Questions three and four also require squinting at the subject; however, they bring into play two other valuable aids as well—*COMPARISON*, and *CONSERVATION OF VALUES.* Let us explore squinting first.

THE VALUE SCALE

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9





"GRETCHEN SEWING" Oil 10″ × 16″

This is an early portrait (1985) of my daughter Gretchen in our Virginia mountain home—a classic Dutch composition (although horizontal instead of vertical) and a perfect example of the use of pattern to achieve a design. (See CHAPTER EIGHT- COMPOSITION, page 160.) It is almost Rembrandtesque in the use of transparent painting in all of the darks, and opaque paint in all light areas. Pattern, especially one as strong and simple as this one, is probably the strongest compositional motif. Note how nearly all light areas are connected, as are all dark areas. There are no "floating" spots of light or color to draw the observer's eye away from the focal point. For pure concentration of attention, nothing beats this. It is like a single voice in a quiet room.

SQUINTING

Learn this and you're home free! It is one of the most valuable skills you can have. Why? Because your most fundamental technical problem in "getting it right" is to *simplify* what you see. The most direct way to do that is by partly closing your eyes when you look at your subject. Squint down until most detail disappears and what you are looking at can be grasped as a few simple coherent shapes. When I look at paintings by artists such as Sorolla, or Cecilia Beaux, or Zorn, it is still sometimes hard for me to realize that what I am seeing is what they saw with their eyes *half-shut!* They knew how to make things simple!

Simplification is obviously necessary before you can paint many of the things you see. Imagine the countless details in a field of grass, a head of hair, falling snow, a lace dress, or the branches on a line of trees against the sky. There are too many color changes, value transitions, edges, and odd shapes in such things to attempt to render them literally.[3] Each thing we look at requires simplification at least to the extent that we can represent it with expedient brushstrokes. Squinting at the subject allows us to reduce detail to patterns that we can manage. To illustrate: Hold this book at arm's length, look at the text, and slowly close your eyes until the paragraphs form gray rectangles on the page—now you have simplified, and you can paint the page without doing the individual words and letters.

Besides the infinity of detail which nature presents to us, complication in a subject also requires that the edges of color shapes be sorted out according to their relative hardness or softness.[4] When one shape blends gradually into another it is hard to pinpoint where one ends and the other begins. When transitions are that indefinite, they must be painted that way. It is as simple as that. If you paint a fuzzy shape clearly and distinctly, it won't look like the shape on your subject. Resist the impulse to open your eyes to see more clearly because doing that defeats the purpose of squinting. *You must rely on what you see when you squint down.* If edges remain strong when you squint, paint them that way. If they are not, don't make them clear unless there is a good reason to, and the change doesn't significantly alter the way a subject looks.

JUST DO IT!

Non-artists watching you squint might think you are angry, in pain, or have eye trouble, but pay no attention to them because it works, and that is all that counts. Besides, it's better than having them watch you do a bad painting. It might seem confusing at first, but please be patient. Useful squinting is something that comes with practice, and useful practice means doing it properly. Properly means closing your eyes down far enough to reduce the subject to a few shapes—yet not so far that *all* form is lost. The idea is merely to make things simple, not make them disappear in a blur of fuzzy darks—so don't shut your eyes down *too* far.

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3 Many artists try to achieve an exaggerated "photographic" appearance in their work. German art in the 15th century was like that, so were many Dutch and Flemish paintings. Their way of working seems appropriate to me because they were the early experimenters in realism, but more sophisticated methods of realistic painting followed their efforts. For that reason, I regard meticulously detailed pictures done today as naive, as if the artist lacked the ingenuity to show detail in a more fascinating way. Even when such paintings are reasonably successful, they evoke little more than (my) admiration for the patience required to do them.

4 See *EDGES*, Chapter 6.

There is a definite limit to how far down you can squint before your image becomes something like what you might see if you were legally blind. It doesn't take much trying to find that point. My experience has been that only a very little closing of the eyes is necessary, perhaps as little as five or ten percent. Physically, when you squint, your eyelashes come together to form a tiny diffusion screen. That is what does the trick. Any further closing down does not help.

SQUINTING DON'TS

It is important to be aware of what *not* to look for when squinting. Here are some things to keep in mind:

1. It is not helpful in determining color. Colors darken when you do it, and you can't identify them properly. Open your eyes for color.[5]

2. It is also not meant to be a way of seeing the true values in a subject. Obviously, the actual values will be lighter when you view your subject normally with open eyes (the darkest darks, however, will remain as they appear when you squint). Keep in mind that the purpose of squinting is to make judgments about the *relationships* among and between values, not to paint the *actual* shades you see during squinting. In other words you squint down not to see how light or dark things really are, but rather which values are lightest, which are darkest, and which fall into the middle tones—*compared to one another.*

3. Some common sense is needed. Many of the things we paint consist of complicated tangles of small irregular contrasting values that cannot be interpreted as a single shape with only one predominant value. You cannot, after all, average out the black and white stripes on a zebra and paint him flat gray. He won't look like a zebra! In such cases, try to separate your subject in as few major value shapes as possible. If the shapes are very tiny and numerous, view them from the greatest distance practicable, so they merge to form a single value.

4. I have a natural tendency to simply forget to keep squinting and open my eyes to see a vague area more clearly. We all do it, but it is not a good idea. Why? Because looking wide-eyed at my subject, I will always see more values than I want or *need.* The longer I stare at a single spot, such as cloud in a landscape for example, the more values will appear. That happens because the iris of my eye contracts to accommodate the brightness, and I therefore see additional value changes in that one particular spot. Likewise, when looking into a dark area with wide open eyes, my iris enlarges, and I see many value changes. Those values *are* really there, but they are rarely as light as values outside the shadow areas.

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5 In my art school days, some of my fellow students tried to get around the darkening problem caused by squinting. Instead, they threw their eyes out of focus or looked through heavy lenses. They all got headaches from eyestrain and never succeeded in sorting out values. (I tried it too, so I know.) The reason that doesn't work has something to do with the eye's automatic focusing response and the disorientation that follows when it is frustrated. Working from poorly-focused photos has the same unsettling effect. Avoid them.

5. Be careful of reflected lights within shadows. They are never as light or as colorful as they seem at a casual glance. Squint down at them, and you will see that they are about the same value as the overall shadow area.

6. ***Never squint at your canvas!*** People do this all the time because it seems to eliminate mistakes by making everything in their picture look soft and "arty." It is the same device that Hollywood uses to film aging movie stars (using a soft focus lens to obscure wrinkles). They only kid themselves and so will you. So to repeat—squint at your subject, but *open* your eyes to look at your painting! ***Don't get this backwards!***

USING COMPARISON TO GET THE "RIGHT" VALUES

I have been describing squinting as a way of simplifying the subject, but how do I pick out the "right" values once I have things sorted out? Let me first give you my definition of "right values" in a painting—they are any set of darks and lights that have the same relationship to one another as the values in my subject. If the degree of contrast in my painting is the same as in the subject, then I'm on the money. *Comparison* allows me to do that. Comparison is a vital technique for determining all elements in a painting—edges, color, and drawing—as well as values. (Drawing is, after all, simply *comparing* dimensions to an established measurement.) When comparison is used along with squinting, it tells you when something doesn't belong, and when it does. Comparing is most effective when you step back, squint down, and judge your entire painting against the entire subject. Sargent reportedly placed his canvas very close to his subject, making all his decisions from a stepped-back position (about eight feet). He then returned to his canvas, applied his brushstrokes (without looking at the model), and stepped back again to see if they looked right. He is said to have done that for virtually every brushstroke in his paintings. That took exceptional discipline, but judging from his work, it was certainly worth it.

While comparing is clearly important, it isn't particularly difficult. All of us use it in our daily routines to make judgments about everything from what color socks to wear, to who will make a good president. Naturally, a *standard* of some kind is always involved. I choose an obvious easy-to-see value in the subject as my standard of comparison. I will often select a model's white collar or black hair, for example. It is then relatively easy for me to judge the subtle skin tones (middle values) by comparing them to the pure white or black. Subjects with extremely contrasting values are always easier to sort out than those having very balanced values. One reason I love snowy landscapes, and why they are a snap to paint, is that I have all of that lovely white stuff as a criterion for comparison.

CONSERVATION OF VALUES

The masters who maintained simple value patterns in their paintings seldom used more than five values (except in the transition zones and soft edges between shapes). You can see this dramatically in black and white reproductions of works by Howard Pyle, Serov, Vandyke, and others. They were stingy with the number of tones they used and never employed more than were necessary. In many of his portraits, Sargent usually employed only three values in the light, two in the darks, and then added some incidental highlights and dark accents.



"ANTIQUE MIRROR" Oil 22″ × 26″

This *economy* or *conservation of values* is based on two ideas. The first is that a few clear-cut values in a painting will yield a more powerful visual effect (though not necessarily a more "artistic" one) than a profusion of small values. That is why Impressionistic painting, which as a rule pays little attention to strong value patterns, is not as effective in monochrome reproduction as it is in full color. (Impressionism by its nature is concerned with other effects.)

The second idea is that it is unnecessary to use *all* values in a subject. Color changes can frequently be used instead. This substitution of color for value is often not only more pleasing, but also makes better sense. Why? Because we have many more colors than values at our disposal, so using a color instead *saves* a value. Superb examples of that use of color are found in the paintings of Mary Cassatt. She had the uncanny ability to portray form with almost no perceptible darkening—a feat impossible without color.

Manet and Berthe Morisot were also good at that. They understood the weakness in overmodeling—the use of too many values to indicate form. They were careful to keep their designs strong by maintaining simple values—clearly establishing their major areas as belonging in either the light or dark, and not invading those areas with needless or inappropriate values.

Fortunately, we have an unlimited supply of colors and ways to use them. For example, in areas of gradual darkening caused by contours, *a turn in the form on a subject of as much as 40 degrees can be shown with color changes alone* before a change in value becomes necessary. My personal guideline is to always check if changing the color temperatures of my mixtures will do the job before I change the value.

Value relationships are certainly not all this cut and dried, and there is certainly room to make choices about emphasizing or restraining them to meet your artistic intentions, but keeping your values uncomplicated and few in number is a sound idea no matter what creative changes you do or do not make. It allows you to simplify the way you look at a subject and render it. I also believe—without question—that it is the basis of strong color and design.

TIPS ON VALUES

Watch out for highlights! They are rarely as bright as you think they are. Choose not to paint them at all unless you think they are necessary. (This is especially true in portraits.) If you must paint them, find out what color they are, don't just use white alone. Also, look for one highlight to dominate all others in a painting. This is especially true in painting eyes. The highlight in one eye (usually the nearest to you) always predominates over the other, and neither are as bright as they first appear. Don't just make them white, make them a color (usually it is cool). Squint at them and see!

The same is true for the whites of eyes. They are never *white!* Usually they are similar in color to surrounding flesh tones, but slightly lighter and less warm (and quite cooler in children's eyes). Also the whites of both eyes in a subject, or the whites on either side of a pupil, are rarely equal in value, and their edges, as all edges in eyes, are always soft. Painting things too light or too dark always happens when you don't accept what you see when you squint, or when you open your eyes to see more clearly. Isn't this great to know?

Dark accents, where they are appropriate, are always more effective than highlights. Look for them! Almost always they will be extremely *warm* in temperature—warmer than any nearby color *regardless of the temperature of the light source on the subject*. I don't know why this is so, they just *are*. Usually they will be mixtures of Transparent Oxide Red plus Alizarin Crimson and a touch of Ultramarine Blue Deep. Cool colors as dark accents usually produce a "dirty" look. Exceptions where the dark accents actually *are* cool (relative to surrounding colors) usually involve local color changes at the point of the accent, such as an abrupt pattern change in the folds of fabrics, or more frequently, in landscape painting when many different substances are intermingled (soil, grass, rocks, water, snow, branches, etc.). Transparent substances such as water, ice, snow, clouds, etc., also can have cool dark accents along with warm ones.

Choose to be bold rather than timid with values. Don't hold back when you clearly see strong lights and darks. For example, the most common error I see when students do portraits or figures is a reluctance to paint dark enough in shadow areas. The main reason this happens is they are afraid that the color will not look like "flesh," or it will look "muddy." Neither of these things will happen if the appropriate color temperature is maintained. Flesh tones, after all, can be *any* color—even pitch black when the lights go out.

The other more common reason for painting darks too light is that painters tend to open their eyes to see better into the shadows—that natural reflex again, and it's OK for seeing color, but don't do it for values—squint and compare the shadow to other correctly painted darks.



"STONE BRIDGE" Oil 16″ × 36″

SUMMING UP

1. We only have nine values to work with from white to black, and we can't hope to duplicate the true range of lights and darks in nature.

2. We can, however, create the effect of light by using the relationships between values in our pictures.

3. We can determine those relationships by squinting down at our subject to simplify it until we can see which areas and shapes are lightest, darkest, and which fall into a limited range of middle tones.

4. We can use a standard of comparison such as a pure white or black in the subject to make those judgments.

5. We can avoid running out of values and overmodeling by substituting color changes for value changes whenever possible.

6. We can effect a strong value structure in a painting by restricting the number of values in the major areas.

7. Most important of all—PRACTICE THE SKILL OF SQUINTING UNTIL IT BECOMES SECOND NATURE TO YOU. BELIEVE AND ACCEPT WHAT YOU SEE WHEN YOU SQUINT, AND NEVER DOUBT IT.



"KEWASKUM SNOWFALL"
Oil 9″ × 18″



"PARKBENCH" (Madrid) Oil 8″ × 12″

CHAPTER SIX—EDGES

Think about edges the way you would think about kissing someone. How many are the ways—and what can you impart in the process? Think of edges as exquisite subtleties, as the means to transmit romance, as ways to make your dabs of paint whisper, or shout, and reach nuances beyond the range of color. Think of them as visual poetry oozing from your brush—but especially think of edges as you would the agents of expression in music.

It is surprising how many parallels there are between music and painting. We artists speak of harmony, tones, rhythm, notes, form, composition, and so on—words that are also musical terms. I think of edges as pianissimo (very soft), andante (flowing), allegro vivace (fast and lively), maestoso (majestic), fortissimo con sforzando (whamo!). These beautiful adjectives are used in musical phrasing to designate the physical manner in which notes are "attacked" as well as the way they are strung together. This variation of touch and speed gives music its richness of expression, and a lavish variety of edges does the same thing in painting.

While there is certainly no exact correlation between music and painting, certain comparisons can be made about the way we "attack" a painting with our "notes" of color. Each time we touch a brush to our canvas we create *edges* on the fringe of each brushstroke—and it is the character of those edges that makes the difference. That difference is not only about the lyrical quality of our painting, it is also crucial to whether or not our work looks convincing. You and I focus our eyes in a uniquely selective way when we look at things in the course of our daily routines. Edges are the only visual tools I am aware of that can replicate that special way of focusing.

We see in ways that no cameras or recording device can quite duplicate (not yet anyway). So far, only a certain type of highly-skilled painting can come close to the way we humans actually see things (because the *seeing* painter *is* the recording device). If we are sensitive to the variety of edges in our subject, and we can translate them into appropriately hard or soft transitions between color shapes, there will be magic in our painting. If we ignore edges, our work will be flat and unconvincing. Remember, I am referring here only to painting that attempts to create an *illusion* of an individual's ordinary visual reality. Virtually all other ways of painting, while unquestionably valid in terms of artistic license, are deviations from, or changed versions, of nature.

Superb displays of edges are present in most of the masterpieces of representational painting beginning about the time of Velasquez and Hals and continuing through the beginning of the 20th century. Virtuosos of edges were keenly aware of them and made full use of their potential. Today however, edges are probably the least understood of our tools.[1] I am not sure why this is so, perhaps it is because there is something uncomfortably elusive about them. Their very nature makes them difficult to measure or define, and much in our perception of edges as well as our judgment in rendering them is purely subjective. The good news is that there *are* things about edges that are not arbitrary, so let us explore them together.

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1 Since the 1930s, except for the work of some distinguished illustrators, the skills attending edges appear to have gradually declined in painting. To my knowledge, not much has been written at length about them, and they are given limited attention in painting instruction.



"LOVELAND GENTLEMAN"
Oil 16″ × 18″

WHAT ARE EDGES ANYWAY?

Edges are the borderlines between shapes of color—where they fit together. They occur at *all* boundaries of *all* shapes within a painting as well as in a subject. Those boundaries—edges—are customarily designated as either "hard" or "soft" in varying degrees. The hardness or softness of the edges describes the *transitions* between those shapes. They can be extremely abrupt (hard or sharp edge), or very gradual (soft edge), or somewhere in-between. For those "in-between" edges, let's call them "moderate" or "intermediate." When a shape of color blends into another so gradually that it is impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends, it is called a *lost* edge.

Unfortunately, we lack vocabulary to describe edges any better than that. Unlike our musician friends, we labor without the technical expressions that could specify exactly how soft or hard an edge might be. All we have are a few adjectives—soft, moderate, hard (or sharp), and lost. That's about it except for words like *fuzzy, hazy, blurred, firm, razor sharp,* or modifiers such as *very, medium, extremely,* and so on—not much to choose from.

In this chapter we will explore together three aspects of edges:

1. How and why they occur in the subject.

2. How to identify their characteristics.

3. How to translate them into brushstrokes.

THE CAUSES OF EDGES IN A SUBJECT

If you are new to the use of edges, or have trouble seeing them, it may help to begin by understanding how they occur. Start by looking carefully at something—anything. Look around the room where you sit reading this, look out the window, or just glance at yourself in a mirror, and you will see edges wherever any two or more visible shapes meet. Here are the main reasons they appear the way they do:

A. The inherent shape of things. Often you can expect to see soft edges on rounded objects such as anatomical features, the folds in fabrics, or a field of grass curving slowly away. Anything angular or sheared, like a sheet of paper or a stiff collar, or architectural forms, may seem sharply-edged.

B. The intrinsic ("local") value and color of things (like a yellow dress or black hat). Elements or shapes that are similar in value or color will *appear* to have a softer transition between them than elements which contrast, even though the real (physical) edge is the same. For example: If you place a dark blue against a dark green, their boundary will look softer than if the colors are dark blue against bright orange.

C. The nature of things—what they are made of—clouds, curly blond hair, and the rear ends of ducks are likely to have softer edges than bricks or door frames. The substances of things, however, are not always a reliable guide in determining an edge.

D. The light—how strong, or weak, or diffused it is, and the angle it is hitting the subject. A single powerful light source such as the sun or a spotlight striking a subject at right angles to you will likely produce sharp edges, usually as cast shadows. On the other hand, north daylight or overcast light will yield softly-diffused edges. Hard edges in diffuse light are mainly the result of something other than the light.

E. The atmosphere—how clear or murky it is. This is a familiar concern in landscape and marine painting, though it occasionally happens indoors as well. The clarity of the air, or the lack of it, is a powerful influence on the quality of the light—that, in turn, affects edges. All edges in a landscape tend to soften with distance. Fog and haze, for example, dramatically subdue edges with distance, while clear air can often maintain somewhat sharper edges at long distances.[2]

F. Motion. To our eyes, things blur when they move. If you paint moving things with hard edges it will look as if you copied a high-speed photograph. Ocean waves, flying birds, waterfalls, trees in the wind, and everything else that moves must be carefully studied as edge problems. Your subject ought to be *movement* itself, rather than the *thing* in motion—the *flight* of a flying bird, for example, not how pretty its feathers are. Nearly all movement in nature occurs as wave motion or other similar repetitive flow. Even when things appear to change randomly and unpredictably (like cloud shapes), their movements have a pattern that can be understood. Take the time necessary to see such patterns—notice the shapes that occur and reoccur. Then paint them with *soft* edges (a certain amount of experimenting is usually necessary). The result will be surprisingly convincing.

A note of caution—there is rarely a single cause for the appearance of an edge. The way it looks in a subject is usually a *combination* of the main factors described above. Atmosphere, light, values, colors, motion, textures, and form can intermingle in bewildering ways. It is interesting to figure out what you are looking at, but don't worry if you can't explain it. It is more important to simply recognize edges. I recognize countless everyday things and deal with them successfully without understanding them in the slightest—my tax returns, for example. As a general policy, it is a good idea to place the *sharpest* edges in your painting within or very near the focal point because we see that way naturally. Glance around and you will see that it is impossible to focus on one thing and still have sharp edges in your peripheral vision.

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2 A problem I am familiar with. The unusually clear air here in the Rocky Mountains often defeats the effect of aerial perspective. Distant mountain ranges can appear as close as nearby ones—very annoying. Sargent complained about it too. We have that much in common.

AWARENESS OF EDGES

Using the information from the five points I have just described, look again at something near and familiar. The kitchen with its pots and pans is a good place (and food always has great edges). The bathroom is ideal too—you can take your clothes off and check out your *own* edges in the mirror—or go out where you can see mountains and trees and a sky full of clouds (but put your clothes back on first). Pick out individual things, then ask yourself these questions to help you understand what you are seeing:

Is the edge of the shape you are looking at curving away from you or toward you?

Is the curve smooth and gradual or abrupt?

Is the color shape you are looking at the same color or value as adjacent shapes, or is it a different color and value?

Are you looking at something unclear or complex—mist or fur or tall grass in the wind—or is it something geometric with sharp angles such as buildings or rock formations?

Are your shapes in snappy bright sunlight, or are they back in the dim shadows?

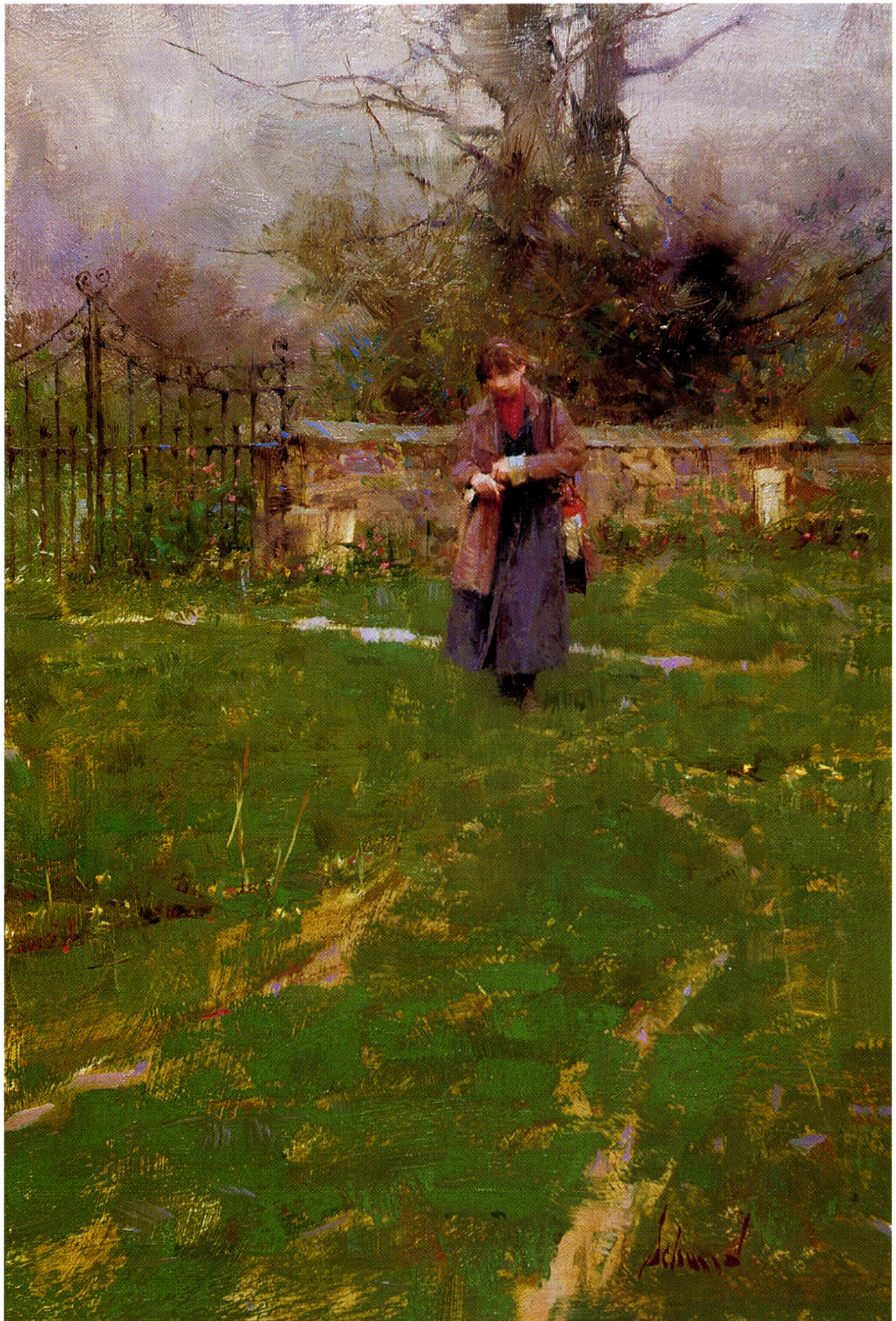
Are you in subdued north daylight with no cast shadows?

In the landscape, is it foggy out or clear? Does the clarity of the air decrease with distance?

Answering these questions will go a long way toward an understanding of *why* the edges on the things you see look the way they do, but don't go overboard with analysis. Figuring out the cause of an edge is definitely handy to rescue yourself from the occasional predicament of not being able to identify an edge. However, it is not essential to have a rational explanation to paint it convincingly. For example, if you recognize a soft edge, that's all the information you need! It isn't really necessary to know *why* it is soft. Just paint it the way it looks! Besides (and this is important), understanding the causes of edges is not enough. You must also be able to determine their relationships—how hard or soft they are *compared* to one another.

SEEING EDGES SELECTIVELY—LEARNING TO SQUINT AND COMPARE

Seeing edges requires the same two important aids—squinting and comparison—that I described in the previous chapter on values. They are *essential* in working with edges, and you must do them *together*. Let me dwell on squinting first. Read what follows next very carefully. You *must* understand it.



This is the only painting of mine I ever copied. It was promised for a one-man show in 1993 (the painting done a year earlier), but I was so fond of it that I did a larger version for the exhibition—slightly cooler and without the iron gate. I wanted to keep the original for myself because it touched me in a way few other of my paintings ever do—well, first of all because it is Nancy (and the first time I had used her in a landscape). Secondly, it had that certain dreamy English light, which I also love. I also managed to capture, after many tries, the elusive green peculiar to the British Isles and other places, such as our Pacific Northwest and Alaska. (It turned out, in this case, to be mainly Viridian, Yellow Ochre light, and White, with a bit of Cadmium Yellow here and there.) In addition, I have always been fascinated with the Barbizon school of 19th Century French painters—Corot, Millet and others—and I felt I had achieved something of their technical effects, perhaps even taken them a step further in terms of color harmony..

I liked the edges too, particularly in the trees and sky, which is why I put the picture in this section on Edges. The edges—the interplay of hard and soft transitions, along with the rich (middle-toned) color harmony, created a mood so dreamlike I almost think Nancy might slowly vanish before my eyes.

"CHURCHYARD" (Yorkshire)
Oil 8″ × 12″

SQUINTING (YET AGAIN)

Squinting applies to seeing edges and values in a remarkably similar way. Squinting down at your subject to simplify it will give you the same type of information about both. Just as you half-closed your eyes to determine the lightest light, the darkest darks, and the ranking of middle values, so too will squinting help you to see which edges are sharpest, which are softest, and which fall into a middle range. Squinting allows you to see where things blend the most, where they stand out distinctly, and the pecking order of all the remaining edges. It is an amazingly simple and effective technique. The aim is to obtain an orderly grasp of the edges in your subject. That means getting practical information—the evaluations you need to paint your picture—rather than just seeing a dark fuzzy image of your subject.

Squinting proficiently takes concentration, but it's worth any effort to get good at it. Try some practice squinting with a bright high-contrast subject. It's easier at first to get the hang of it with a strongly lit subject instead of practicing on something low-keyed and subtle. Outdoors on a sunny day in your back yard is a good place for starters. It isn't necessary to paint. Just pour yourself a glass of iced tea (nothing stronger, if you please), sit down, and notice some specific things.

Begin with your eyes wide open. See how sharply-focused everything is, and how much detail there is. Notice how the longer you look at one particular spot, the *more* detail emerges. Notice too that you see innumerable color and value changes, and that all edges appear clear and crisp. If your eyesight is good, you can see more than you could possibly paint.

Now close your eyes just a tiny fraction—note that some detail diminishes—that some values and colors merge—that some edges begin to lose a bit of clarity. (The first edges to disappear completely will be the soft transitions in the subject.) You are now beginning to *simplify* your subject.

At this point you need to be particularly alert. Notice *exactly* which details diminish and which values and colors blend into larger shapes. See how many of the tiny clear edges that you could see with your eyes wide open, now join to form larger softer edges. Make note too of the things that do *NOT* change very much as you squint. See which shapes and edges retain their integrity. Those will be your strong elements.

Close your eyes a bit more and see how things simplify even more. Note how the strong shapes now tend to dominate and absorb smaller shapes. See how edges within dark value areas tend to be much softer than edges in the higher contrast light areas, and how detail tends to disappear *altogether* in the darkest darks. The very *last* discernible edge you see before your eyes shut will probably be the sharpest edge of all.

YET MORE ON SQUINTING

What I have described is an orderly and effective way of simplifying. It is orderly because you close down your eyes in stages, noting how edges appear at each stage. It is effective because you learn something that you can express as brushstrokes—which is precisely what you are after. So, here is a little myth you can shatter at cocktail parties—when we painters look at things, we do not see more than other people, we see *less*. We do not see beauty where others can't, but we do have the ability to eliminate trivia, and concentrate a viewer's attention. That is why we can paint! We simplify things!

Let me repeat that squinting is not helpful in determining color, but it works like magic in seeing edges, and once you get the hang of it, you will use it to see edges and values simultaneously. Just don't squint down to the point where your image is so dark and blurred that it is useless.

Lastly, it only works marginally when working with photographs. Squinting at a photo is about the same as squinting at a painting. *Everything* gets fuzzy. Squinting for values in a photo *is* sometimes useful, but because of the limited data caught by the camera, the information you can obtain is minimal compared to squinting at the real thing.

COMPARISON

Some edges in every subject will stand out conspicuously as either extremely sharp or completely lost even with your eyes wide open. You can't miss them. ***Use those edges as your standards of comparison.*** Let us say you are looking at what you think is a hard edge, but you don't know *how* hard. Well, if you have already selected a razor-sharp edge in the subject as your hardest, you only need to compare the edge in question to *that* one to see the difference. The same holds true, of course, for soft edges. Pick one that you are *sure* of to be your standard of comparison, and use it to judge the relative softness of others.

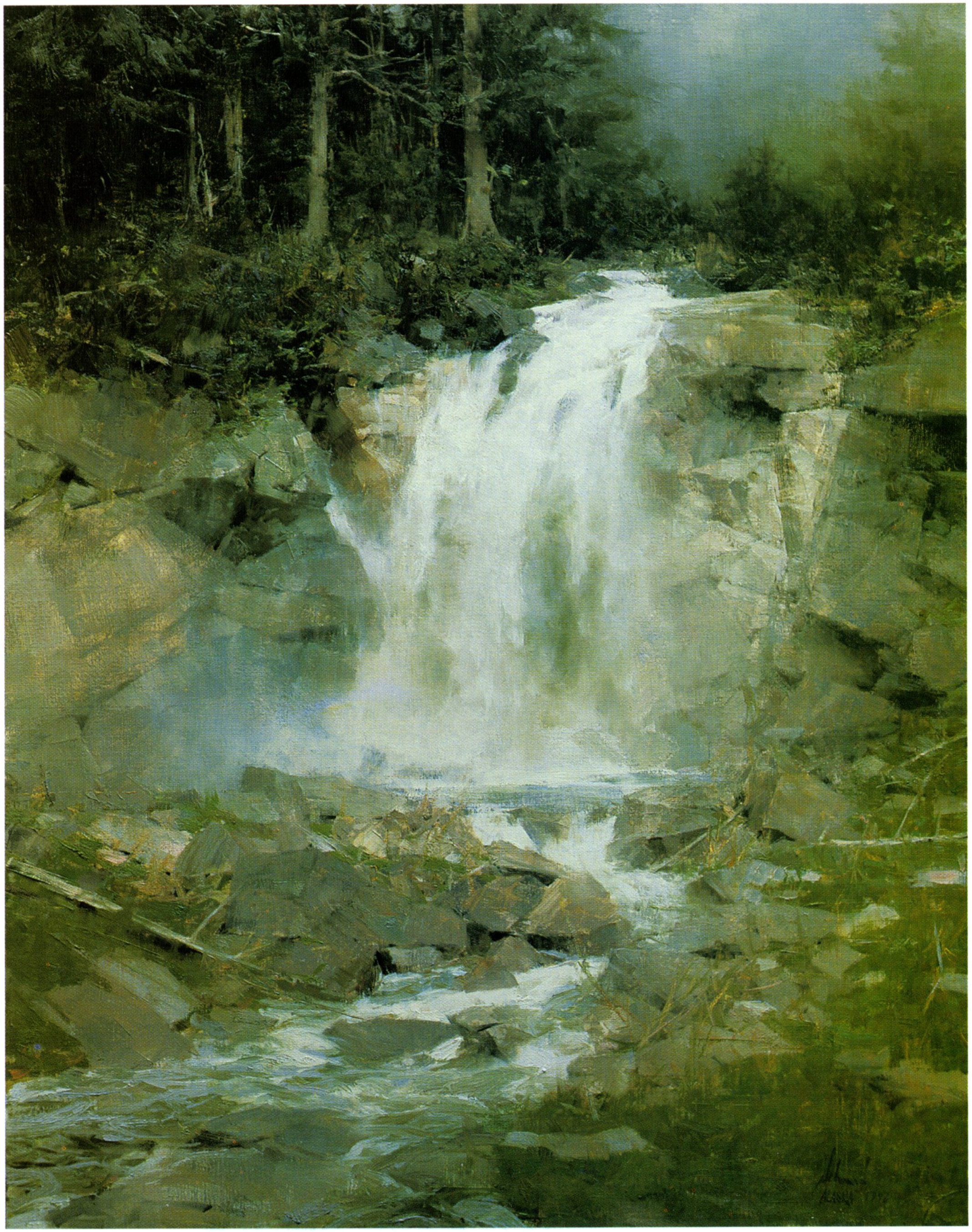
As you become aware of edges, you will discover their close tie to values. Their interrelationship stems from the fact that they arise *mutually*. They often happen together from the same circumstances and operate as a "feedback" system. Values and edges reciprocate, just as values and colors do.[3] Shapes with similarities in color or value will appear to have soft edges connecting them, and shapes with dissimilar properties will seem to have harder edges—*even when the real (physical) edge is the same*. For example, two adjacent shapes (or brushstrokes) of similar value will appear to have a soft edge between them because the value difference is small. Conversely, the illusion of a hard edge is likely when you bring together shapes that contrast sharply in value or color—as when you join a deep blue-purple shape with a very light yellow-orange shape. Intrinsically soft things like clouds at sunset can appear to have hard edges because of the bright sky behind them.

So we see that a very soft or lost edge between contrasting values and colors can tend to *diminish* the value difference between them, while a hard edge between similar values and colors can *exaggerate* their difference. Thus, edges can make values look the way they do—and values can make edges look the way they do.

Natural phenomena will also affect both values and edges (and color as well). Fog or mist or light intensity will influence values, edges, and color *simultaneously*, or even a single change in one will change the others. For example, a change in value will always mean a consequent change in color (because you must use another color to lighten or darken something), and *that* will create a change in the edge. You have to be ready for anything!

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3 It is amazing and beautiful how this works—how the visual field is interconnected like the *Net of Indra* described by Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth* (Doubleday 1988). The net is a mythical web of precious stones in which each gem reflects all the others, symbolizing the universal connection of everything. In that same way, everything visible looks the way it does because of everything *else* visible acting upon it.



It is impossible to paint a waterfall without an understanding of edges. A waterfall is movement, and movement means change, which, in turn, means very few hard edges. The way a high-speed camera freezes action is nice for catching the agony in a football halfback's face on impact, but it isn't the way we see things. We humans cannot stop things in mid-air and see them in perfect detail. It will not do either to simply paint everything moving as just fuzziness. If I had done that here, the waterfall would look like fog or cotton fluff or downy feathers going over a cliff.

It is none of those things; it is falling water strewing into a variety of recurring patterns as it descends. It was up to me to study the shapes of those patterns and their characteristic edges, and then to replicate them with paint.

"YUKON WATERFALL"
Oil 28″ × 22″



"PETERSBURG" (Alaska) Oil 11″ × 16″

I painted this house outside Petersburg, Alaska in a driving rain so intense that my normally reliable umbrella was useless. In the end, I was hunkered on the ground (with the tide rising) holding my poncho over myself and my canvas, and painting with my free hand. Paul Mullally, Albert Handell, and my Nancy, were out there struggling too—and no one wanted to be the first to chicken out and quit. Such is the mentality of the hard-core landscape painter. I was amazed to see, when I got to a dry calm place, that I had actually captured the drenching wetness of the day with the edges I used in the trees and beyond. I have no clear memory, however, of anything at the time I painted them, except wanting to get out of that miserable rain.

Unfortunately, there are no set rules about edges. Like naughty little boys, they behave as they wish and enjoy teasing. What appears in one situation may not occur in another. There are too many variables (including your own eyesight) to allow for predictability. However, it is extremely helpful to know that these natural illusions (that's what they are) do happen. So be on the lookout and just accept them. After all, your job is to create a picture of the way things look to you. If you try to clarify things for your viewer, your painting will not look like your subject does.

I strongly recommend painting an edge as it APPEARS, regardless of anything else you know about it.

VIEWS ON EDGES

As landscape painting developed, many painters became aware of the effect of diffractive phenomena on values. In seeing their paintings and reading their ideas, it became clear to me that their conclusions had implications for edges as well. Thus, if you take two objects of the same value, but one larger and the other smaller, and look at them against a light source (such as the sky), the smaller one will look *lighter*. This happens because of diffraction—light spilling around the edges of shapes—in this case much more light spilling around in ratio to its size in the smaller one than in the larger one.

The size of a shape *in itself* can determine how light or dark things will look even if they are the same intrinsic value—a big black mass of trees is blacker than a little black bush, and so on.[4] I would add that *the smaller shape will also have softer edges,* and the smaller things get, the more their edges soften (along with their other visual properties, until they become invisible).

One school of thought in the early part of this century was definitely not in favor of fuzzy soft edges. The hard-edge spokesmen warned against softening *anything*—edges in particular. I'm not certain why such an idea prevailed. One reason for it might have been simple ignorance, or lack of experience in painting from life. It could also have arisen from the popularity of palette knife painting in those days—a technique which naturally produced hard edges. Knife painting in western European art was rather heavy-handed—laid on thick, like stucco—unlike the more sophisticated and subtle technique of the contemporaneous Russian school. They viewed the knife as a tool of great expressive potential, instead of merely a trowel. A more widespread reason for not blending was probably the trendy preoccupation with color, stimulated by Impressionism. The influence of the Impressionists continued full-tilt long after the charter group disappeared. (The original movement lasted a mere 20 years or so.) In general, the strict colorists avoided blending, preferring to form their edge by applying several graduated colors side by side.

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4 The same is true of color. A whole wall painted red is "redder" than a small drop of the same paint. This saturation effect of large value or color areas is a purely psychological anomaly. While these observations are obviously valid and good to know, in practice other factors can often intervene. Things like the angle of the light, reflected light, the material composition of the subject and its three-dimensional configuration, to name just a few. (There are many others.) Nature is so full of tricks that there is no reliable way to contrive a formula which applies in all circumstances. In the end, only your own well-trained eye is reliable. Paint what you see!

Others might have been reacting to what they considered to be the misuse of blending—the "feathering"[5] or fusing of colors to achieve edges—perhaps on the grounds of superficiality (and perhaps, rightly so). At any rate, and for whatever reason, there arose simultaneously with artists using very loose brushing techniques, a separate group with a clear preference for deliberate and coherent value-color gradations to create edges

To smoosh the paint around or not to smoosh—that is the question. (Forgive me, Shakespeare.) Whether 'tis nobler in the mind (or better in a painting) to blend edges to soften them, or to paint small increments of color changes? It comes down to a matter of choice. Monet lived for color changes; Zorn preferred the broad brush style with voluptuous edges. Both created marvelous paintings. We all have our ways, and in the end, what really matters is achieving our intended effects. How we get there is less important than the result. Personally I like to have as many options as possible, and I would not rule out anything if it works. What follows here is some of "what works."

CREATING EDGES IN A PAINTING

How can paint be manipulated so that it duplicates the edges you see in your subject? Physically, there are really only *three* ways that I know of.

1. By degrees of blending (soft edges), or refraining from blending (hard).

2. By mixing and applying intermediate colors *instead* of blending.

3. Applying intermediate colors *and* blending them (carefully).

BLENDING

This is familiar to everyone who works with oil paint. (Watercolorists blend too, of course, but in entirely different ways.) You find out how easy it is to do right away. It is one of the most appealing characteristics of the medium. Usually it is done by mixing edges together with a brush while the paint is still wet. These wet-into-wet edges can be produced with your brush, your fingers, a rag, a palette knife, or anything else that does the job. The best way to learn is to experiment until you get a "feel" for how paint behaves and what your tools can do. There is no right way or wrong way to do it, there is only the method that works the way you want it to.

If it is necessary to work into paint that has already dried, edges can be created with "dry brush" or "scumbling" techniques. Dry brush is lightly dragging a brush heavily loaded with paint over an already painted area. Scumbling is using a *lightly* loaded brush to scrub paint into a surface. If you are matching the color of any existing dried paint, remember that pigments darken slightly as they dry. This is most noticeable in lighter values where white is used, so mix your new paint a fraction lighter.

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5 The word probably originated from the old practice of using the large wing feathers of geese as blending tools.

Creating edges that have the appearance of wet-in-wet on a painting that has dried is not always satisfactory. Brushstrokes done over dried paint lack the fluid look that I like. Therefore, I don't fool around with a dried painting if I can help it.[6] Sometimes though, working into dry paint cannot be avoided.

When I must work into a dry painting, I prefer to repaint the areas where I want to work into. If I am working on something large that requires several days of working with the probability of drying in between, I do my finishing work as I go along and then use a palette knife to scrape the areas where I must leave off. Then I repaint those scraped areas at the beginning of the next session. That way I am always working into fresh paint. Scraping also lets me avoid a troublesome buildup of paint.

I'm convinced that this was how Sargent and Zorn and Sorolla were able to execute some of their large works while still having them appear to have been done wet-into-wet. A look at some of their unfinished works shows this clearly. However, they all had occasion to repaint areas in pictures that had been finished for some time and thoroughly dried. (Sargent's "Madam X," and Sorolla's "La Siesta," for example.) The initial brushstrokes still show through in these paintings (revealing what they were trying to conceal), even where heavily overpainted. There are cracks too. Learn from the Masters' mistakes! Get it right the first time!

CREATING EDGES WITH INTERMEDIATE COLORS

The Impressionists were not the first to recognize that the boundaries between shapes of color also had color changes within their edges, but they certainly latched on to it with gusto! In some cases they forgot everything but the color changes in their edges. (Who could blame them?) So off they went in their wondrous directions and gave us dazzling lessons in color (along with other delights). In particular they showed us how *much* color there *is* to take advantage of. They were right on the money when they used distinct graduations of color to soften edges, rather than simply merging shapes with the swipe of a brush as Sargent and Zorn did (certainly no criticism here of their technique of blending, they were pursuing something else). The Impressionists realized that adding the element of color changes to the qualities of hardness and softness in edges enhanced the overall brilliance of a painting.

Edges are rich in color changes, no doubt about it. If you want a dramatic demonstration, stand outside during a sunset and witness the color changes occurring as the sun goes over the horizon, and the edge of the earth's shadow overtakes you. In twenty minutes or so the colors around you can change from bright orange to deep blue. (At sunrise it is the opposite.) That is *exactly* the same thing that happens within the shadow edges of your subjects.

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6 Oil paint allows me to control blending precisely, plus it offers a greater range and variety of effects to choose from than any other medium. (Oil paint can be used to duplicate the effect of any other material, but none can convincingly duplicate oils.) Direct Painting allows for the greatest range of all because it is usually done "Alla Prima" or in one sitting, and that means working wet-into-wet. Since the paint does not have time to dry, I can manipulate it in any way I choose.



This stunningly dignified young lady posed for our painting group at the Loveland Academy (Colorado) in 1992. The study is life-size, and the total painting time was four hours. I include it here because it shows a variety of paint applications—typical opaque painting in the head and hand, transparent washes in the sweater and background, and impasto palette knife work in her blouse and cuff. The array of edges is much richer than it might have been if I had used only one way to apply my paint.

Interesting, isn't it—what you can do with a tiny little trowel and skinny sticks of wood with hair on their ends?

"STUDY OF A YOUNG GIRL"
Oil 20″ × 17″

I like color changes in edges, but I don't restrict myself to any one method to make edges. It doesn't make sense to avoid using other means that might suit my purpose better. (Just remaining within a consistent technique is not enough reason.) Instead, I look to my subject and how I wish to render it for clues about how to deal with an edge. I find it expedient to choose either gradations of color *or* blending, according to the effect I'm after. Often I'm able to combine both methods (as Sorolla did so well) by doing an edge first as tiny color changes, then merging them delicately with a single slow careful stroke with a clean brush. (Soft as a whisper, if you please, and I use a pliable sable or badger brush. The trick is to lay in the color changes with a *minimum* of paint (but never thinned) and resist the temptation to over-blend—one slow careful sleek brushstroke must do the job.

Portraits and figure studies are especially rich in color changes on edges. They present splendid opportunities for combining broken color with blending. The pigmentation and semitransparent nature of human skin combine with light to create delicate (and surprising) tonalities when local colors change at the same point where anatomical forms turn. For example, there is often a sudden warming of color on the bridge of a nose as the form plunges into shadow. Often, a modest change in form alone will produce a color change. In north daylight, an edge can abruptly take on a blue tinge as it turns into the direction of the light. Such pearls are not to be wasted by ignoring them.

I look for those opportunities and use them whenever I feel they are important to my painting. Unfortunately, the time restrictions inherent in Alla Prima painting will not allow me to develop *all* the colors I see. Most edges can be painted with minimal blending, or just a few graduations of color and value between shapes, and those gradients will simply be small variations of the colors of the shapes I am joining.

BE SENSIBLE

Regardless of your medium, don't get carried away with blended edges. Possibly this error is what bothered Carlson and the others. Nothing weakens a work more than indiscriminate blending. I am sure you have seen those dainty fan-shaped brushes called "blenders," usually made from sable, badger, or squirrel hair. They were used widely in the 19th century when blending was carried to absurd extremes in the fashionable Salon paintings. Blender brushes are not intended to be used as other brushes—to apply paint in a normal brushing motion. Rather, a blender is meant to be held perpendicular over adjacent areas of wet paint, and then lightly tapped up and down with a slight side to side motion. In this way tiny bits of paint are picked up on the delicate ends of the hairs and redeposited, creating a feathery soft edge as smooth as glass.

It's handy to know that can be done, but I don't recommend it as sound practice. My personal preference is to deliberately brandish the richness of paint by maintaining the freshness of my brushstrokes. I like to do a "painterly" painting instead of something that resembles like a big glossy photograph.

***Remember*—soft edges in a painting are *not* an end in themselves. They must be *APPROPRIATELY* soft and should conform to what you perceive them to be in your subject. That is what will make your edges look authentic. Arbitrarily softening everything is like intentionally mumbling when you speak.**



Obviously, this was not painted from life—Nancy could not possibly have held this pose and ever walked normally again. (I can't imagine how field workers or rice planters maintain such postures.) Nevertheless, the photo was not bad, not nearly as colorful as my painting, or as simple, but more or less adequate for the drawing in the figure. I was blatantly selective with the rest of the scene. I always am with watercolor. I like to fiddle with it without undue regard for a precisely realistic rendition (except in key areas). I am happy to use watercolor suggestively, hinting at what I see rather than render it out in detail. Besides, as every watercolorist knows, the medium has a mind of its own, often creating "accidentals" which are better left alone.

"NANCY'S GARDEN"
Watercolor 8″ × 7″

OTHER MEDIUMS

A well-executed watercolor is a genuine tour de force, and I have nothing but humble admiration for anyone who can do it consistently *and* without compromising the subject to accommodate the demands of the medium. Controlling edges in watercolor (matching the edges in the subject) is tricky—oil paint is duck soup by comparison. My nerves will only stand up to doing only a few watercolors each year. (And they invariably end up looking like my oil paintings!)

In watercolor, the physical working surface of the paper is constantly fluctuating due to water absorption and evaporation. Consequently, the probability of accident is very high. A skillful watercolorist is one who knows how wet the paper is, which way the color is running, and how fast it will dry so that it will stop in just the *right* spot. Nerves of steel and some luck are helpful.

I believe that the real skill involved in watercolor painting lies in deliberately producing edges that are authentic, while retaining the delicate transparent character of the medium. My experience with watercolor has taught me that the right paper is one of the essential factors, because everything depends upon keeping the paint in a manipulative state for as long as possible. I recommend working with a paper that retains moisture and resists staining—one that allows for removal of colors without damaging its surface. "Hot or Hard Pressed" papers are best if you make many corrections.

Pastel offers no real impediments to creating edges. If anything, soft edges can happen too easily. Resist the impulse to blend with your fingers. The very nature of pastel allows for only a very limited amount of application before your paper loses its "tooth," and the crispness of the medium is lost. When that happens, the overblending of colors, with its disastrous results, can occur very quickly. Like watercolor, the quality of the working surface is critical. If any one medium cries for the broken color approach, this is it. Get it right on the first try and leave it alone.

FINAL TIPS

The vast majority of edges in any subject will fall into the intermediate range between hardness and softness. Keep this in mind as you work! In our ordinary everyday seeing we are not usually conscious of hard edges in our peripheral vision, which is why they seem unreal when scattered throughout a painting. We are aware of hard edges at or near the point we focus on. Paint the hard edges located at the borders of your subject less conspicuously. One safe way is to hold your strongest edge in reserve until you are dead sure you need it. It's always comforting to have that one emergency shot available. However, if you see the hard edge you want, and you need it in the early stages of a work, go for it and get it over with. When you *do* paint it, don't be shy. I like to lay it on with a palette knife or "loaded" brush (plenty of paint), and I do it with a very slow deliberate stroke. If it looks right, I don't go back and fool with it. If I fail to apply it the way I intended, I scrape it off and do it again. In any case, I do it in *one* stroke—but I do *that* stroke very carefully. If I mess with it using additional strokes, I will weaken it.

Another safe tip—avoid painting thickly while you are manipulating edges. Paint is much easier to control in moderate layers. Save the heavy stuff for later stages—after you have finished correcting and dealt with your difficult problems.



"BENGAL TIGER" Gouache 16″ × 20″

The optical and psychological effects of edges are fascinating. As your skill with them increases, your grasp of their elegance will become more sophisticated and demanding. One of my more intriguing goals is to achieve an integration of edges throughout a painting—composing them in such a way that they cooperate not only with the color harmony and value system, but also with the compositional motif, to form an overall symmetry. It certainly can be done, and it occurs in painting more often than you might think. (Certain 19th century American painters such as Frank Duveneck, Elizabeth Sparhawk Jones, Thomas Dewing, Frank Benson, and Wayman Adams all elevated it to a high art in the maturity of their careers. About the same time in Europe, superb edge techniques were also developed by Mancini in Italy, Degas in France, and Serov in Russia.)

This symmetry is a hierarchy of edges working *with* the design elements within a painting. The aim is to generate dominant and subordinate edges which act to reinforce the overall compositional intent—forcing a viewer's concentration on a single focal point (without being vulgar). Mozart would have tried for this if he had been a painter. Such an integration is the way we naturally see things anyway, but it is anything but easy in painting. I mention this to whet your appetite should you become as captivated by edges as expressive devices as I am. However I cannot expand on the idea here beyond simply mentioning it as something to be pursued, because I am still exploring the possibilities myself. Writing more about it will have to wait for a future book. Besides, what we have examined together here should keep you in good cheer.



"RED SAILBOAT"
(Vancouver)
Oil 8″ × 16″



"CHICKEN" Oil 8″ × 12″

CHAPTER SEVEN—COLOR AND LIGHT

Color is to seeing what flavor is to eating. It is by far the most sensuous element of the visual field, and for many artists, its allure is the sole reason to paint. Yet as wonderful as color is, art students and accomplished painters alike almost unanimously claim it as their number one problem. "Getting the color right" is probably the source of more anguish to artists than anything else in painting.[1] Moreover, color is more difficult to teach and comprehend than all the other technical aspects of painting.

Why is this so? What makes working with color such a struggle? (It needn't be, but let's assume for now that it is.) The answer is that we do not understand its behavior well enough to resolve it into a coherent and predictable system. Some of the confusion stems from its very nature and the way we perceive it; our other problems are more or less self-inflicted. The actuality of color, however, is not theoretical; it is an everyday experience, and even though it may sometimes be puzzling, enough is known about it to grasp it in a practical way.

In this discussion, I outline what I know about the general characteristics of color, some underlying difficulties, and then ways to enjoy it and make it sparkle in your paintings. Please read what I have to say in this first section carefully because it is extremely important to know, but don't be intimidated. What comes after is fascinating information along with some useful instruction.

THE COMPLEXITY AND RELATIVITY OF COLOR

Consider the awesome number of colors and color combinations around us. Researchers claim that the human eye can detect at least ten million hues (Wow!), and that is only a fraction of the spectrum. God was indeed lavish when She created light and color. Fortunately, most of our paintings involve surprisingly few colors, perhaps a few hundred at most, but that is still a lot—more than enough to contend with when the goal is to get each one "right."

A more troublesome property of color is its *relativity*—a color can appear different under different circumstances. The color of anything looks the way it does because of three variables, each influencing the other two like a very complex but interesting *ménage à trois*. They are:

1. The constituent pigments of things—the microscopic substances that absorb and reflect light—hereafter called *local* colors—red rose, green grass, blue eyes, yellow wheat, purple dress, orange pumpkin, and so on. Also there is a certain *lack* of pigmentation to contend with in various transparent things such as water, clouds, and the earth's atmosphere, that causes them to take on the colors of other sources. Transparent matter acts optically, often behaving as a prism, a lens, a mirror, a filter, or a combination of those things in producing color effects.

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[1] They are usually wrong about this. In teaching and working with painters at all skill levels, I found drawing to be their greatest problem. Few, however, are eager to acknowledge it. See Chapter 4.

2. The influence of surrounding colors. Example—the color of your face appears different when you wear a green shirt than when you wear a red one.

3. The ambient light illuminating a subject—you look different in sunlight than in artificial light. (Look at yourself under a mercury vapor streetlight and you'll think you're dead.)

Here is a way to remember these things—*THE LOCAL COLOR OF ANYTHING CHANGES ITS APPEARANCE WHEN EITHER THE LIGHT CHANGES OR ITS SURROUNDING COLORS CHANGE.* In this way, colors seem to behave as mischievously as those impish particles in Quantum Physics—even the way you *look* at them seems to make them change. Colors are slippery devils indeed, with a logic all of their own and a definite reluctance to be pinned down or precisely systemized.

THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE IN DESCRIBING COLOR

Our color perception is an intricate mix of pure sensation and emotional response, which is why trying to describe our exact experience of it using words is difficult (but not impossibly so). Talking or writing about color can sometimes be as exasperating as trying to pin down other such things—flavors, or smells, lyrical sounds, or being in love. Art is often the *only* way to express such things, but as they say, it ain't easy. The subtlety and range of our senses and feelings are so great that when we speak or write about them we soon run out of nouns and adjectives. Our visual experiences far exceed the descriptive capacity of verbal language. Imagine trying to describe or differentiate those ten million hues I mentioned! So bear with me as I grope for words in this examination of color.

THE SUBJECTIVE NATURE OF COLOR PERCEPTION

Because we experience colors as mental perceptions, they can trigger elaborate memory associations, causing each of us to respond to them in a unique way. Some of our color affinities are so deeply internalized that they emerge as strong emotions. In this respect colors often resemble smells. The same color (or fragrance) can stimulate different things in different people. (Blue might be scary to me but pleasantly exciting to you.) Colors do not in themselves *cause* specific psychological effects—we do—we create those effects in our minds because we experience color through the filter of our individual experiences.

Cultural notions also influence our color preferences. Red, for example, is nice on a lady's lips but not on her nose (at least in contemporary Western society).[2] We prefer our milk white, not green, our blood red instead of yellow; our majestic mountains, purple—and twisted color notions, as we know, take on horrible dimensions in the form of racism.

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2 In Victorian times it was fashionable for ladies to put Rouge on their ears, which is one reason why Madam Gautreau's ear looks so pink in Sargent's "Madam X." (I can't imagine a woman like that actually blushing, but then, who knows?) She also powdered the rest of her skin a whitish color, which exaggerated the effect.)

"I am black but comely....Behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves eyes...let me see thy countenance...Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet...My beloved is white and ruddy...Thou art beautiful O my love...Thine head upon thee is Carmel, and the hair of thine head like purple...Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee."—from The Song of Solomon.

Apart from their metaphorical intent, these few excerpted words (forgive me) from the Bible demonstrate the remarkable power of color even used only as words. What images in our minds they create! Imagine the voice you have with your ability to use *actual* color!

Nature is the supreme colorist, and She loves to play with it in every possible way—a a good thing for us—imagine what it would be like if we were all the *same* color. What a Bore! (What would all the bigots do?) How splendid that She has given us, her creatures, such extraordinary and diverse pigmentation. We should rejoice that we are each different, each of us one of Her little color masterpieces. How lucky we are as painters to have the tools to portray another soul...*"fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners."*



"NAN"
Oil 25″ × 21″

The colors of things and the biases we bring to those colors have much to do with even our artistic choices. Often I have heard painters say that they saw the right color but didn't use it because they didn't like it. More commonly, painters have a favorite color on their palette that they use throughout a painting—whether or not that color is present in the subject. Still others have preferred combinations of colors that they repeatedly use simply because they "worked" well in past paintings.

In this way our personal attraction-or-aversion response to certain colors can frustrate accurate perception. Imagine trying to paint snow if white gives you the creeps! More familiar is the complaint about painting summer landscapes that "everything is too green," or that everything is the same green. That is just not true. Summer landscapes, as all other landscapes, contain every color in the rainbow; painters who make such an objection are either not noticing the wealth of colors, or simply revealing their aversion to green.

Much more untidy though is our acquired notion about hot and cold colors (or warm and cool). These terms describe not only the *valid* technical temperature relationships between colors, but also our mistaken identification of specific colors as having *intrinsic* temperatures—such as blue always being cold and orange always warm. They *are,* compared to one another, but not in themselves. It is not always easy to make that distinction. Try comparing orange, red, and yellow to one another—which is warmer? Cooler? And by how much? See the problem? As you read further, the subtleties of color temperature will be examined more thoroughly.

In addition, there is some evidence that the physical perception of color among people with "normal" vision varies somewhat. (I don't mean actual color blindness.) Some individuals, for instance, seem to see their visual field as being overall greener or bluer than others. You can see this color shift clearly in the works of competent painters when they paint the same subject under the same light at the same time.[3] Their paintings seem "correct" yet none are precisely alike in color. Whether this is a physiological curiosity or a simple predilection for certain colors, I don't know, but it is certainly nothing to worry about. If you happen to be of the blue persuasion, just don't get into an argument with someone who sees everything green. Monet and Renoir managed very well and remained friends.

THE LIMITATIONS OF PIGMENT

Paint chemistry has not given us all the palette colors we would like to have, at least not as absolutely permanent stable pigments. This weakness is particularly evident in our choice of pure transparent reds. All of them are prone to fading in light-valued mixtures, and some crack when used alone. While there *is* otherwise a rich selection of pigments to choose from, we still cannot match the entire chromatic range in nature. God creates color in a variety of ways, but paint can only produce color one way—by reflecting light. This is an intrinsic limitation of paint, and we must learn to work within it.

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3 Well-known examples are the same scenes painted by Renoir and Monet: "La Grenouillere" and "Sailboats on the Seine." Monet's works were more blue-violet than Renoir's. Both, however, are "true" within their respective harmonies.

Our materials have other characteristics that can also be bothersome. Oil paint produces disconcerting glare in various brushstrokes; acrylic can't be reworked once it dries; watercolor dries with a matte surface and loses a certain richness in the darks; pastel has the same problem; so does egg tempera, casein, gouache, and so on. Every medium has drawbacks and hindrances, just as each has superb qualities and strengths. It is up to us to understand our medium and know what it can and cannot do.

Recent technology has given us some brilliant new materials, along with new versions of the primary and secondary colors. In spite of manufacturers' claims, however, some of them have not been around long enough to be guaranteed stable. (Conservators measure permanence in centuries.) For all practical purposes, however, the reliable colors we do have are quite enough for any artistic statement because the success or failure of a work does not turn on precisely duplicating nature, nor does it depend on the quality of our materials. It is our aesthetic vision and skill that matter.[4]

MISINFORMATION

In spite of the plethora of color "systems" on hand, no one has yet been able to come up with a comprehensive color "law" that always meets the demands of working from life. Most of the lesser "rules" and many of the odd notions that have come down to us do not stand up very well either. Here are just a few things to watch out for:

- You have all heard the saying about warm colors "advancing" and cool colors "receding" in landscape painting—that is simply false, so don't believe it. There are no such constants in nature. *Sometimes* colors appear cooler with distance, but not *always*.

- Equally wrong is the idea that certain colors naturally "go together," or that others "clash." That is just personal opinion formed by fads or flawed theories of harmony.

- The idea that a color can be "neutralized" by mixing it with its complement isn't true either, because there is no such thing as a neutral color.

- Avoid schemes that offer recipes for creating color harmonies or specific natural effects (like how to paint the color of water, or flowers, or rainy Paris street scenes). They might produce results under certain circumstances, but not in working from life. Nature has given us no such formulas, only a few principles. Be wary too if anyone claims to have a "cure" for your color problems, or offers a theory that if followed will always produce "good" color no matter what.

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4 Back in art school, we (students) liked to complain about our materials. (Easy target.) Bill Mosby would point out to us that if Michelangelo had access to only a broom and a bucket of mud, he would still have painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling, and it would have been just as much of a masterpiece!

- There is also a popular idea that nature has to be "helped," and her colors or forms need to be altered to conform to an ideal of what is compositionally desirable or aesthetically pleasing. That is absurd. Nature is perfect.

- There are no "beautiful" or "ugly" colors. Those words describe our *feelings* about colors, not their intrinsic properties. "Wrong" or "muddy" colors are simply mixtures that are the inappropriate relative temperature for the area in which they are placed.

- All the other common adjectives applied to specific colors: exciting, somber, mellow, sensuous, gay, deathly, bold, feminine, etc., have no valid meaning either. They too refer only to our feelings.

- The names given to many colors are worthless—Rose Red, Canary Yellow, Fuchsia, Mauve, Beige, Spanked Baby Pink—all are just silly. However, the names for artist's pigments, such as Cobalt Blue, Cadmium Red, etc., are functional since they are manufacturers' standards by which we identify specific pigments. (Or are supposed to be—some pigments, such as Yellow Ochre, Viridian, and the Cadmiums vary widely from one brand to another.)

- Lastly, beware of the mystique of color—the notion that you either have a color sense or you don't—or the belief that it is too complex to ever master. Even worse is the often helpless feeling that it doesn't make any sense at all. Color is one of God's nicer ideas. It is there for us to savor, and it has a beautiful order. Trust me on this.

There is more, but I'm sure you see my point. We don't understand color beyond certain basic ideas, and we must be wary of quaint beliefs, fears, and expedient little rules that may have arisen in particular circumstances, but which cannot be applied generally. Given this enigma about color—its complex power and simultaneous elusiveness—then add to it the dubious theories, misinformation, cultural whims, and downright ignorance about it, and it is no wonder that it is so hard to grasp.

THE GOOD NEWS!

Take a deep breath now! The bad part is over! We have mucked around long enough in negatives. I give you now some cheery things to think about. Color should be fun! Remember that and never be afraid of it. There is no reason at all to think of color as intimidating. It has surrounded you all of your life, and you should embrace it joyfully. The things I have described above are not worth getting nervous about. Just be aware of them.

You *can* acquire a sound and useful understanding of color. After all, quite a few artists have mastered its ways. Their works are glorious lessons in seeing and painting it—and there is *no* evidence that they were especially touched by God, or endowed with a unique color perception gene that you don't have. You understand many natural phenomena, at least to the extent that you use them effectively in everyday life. Color is just another one; it is there for you to discover and enjoy.



"DINGLE BOATS" (Ireland) Oil 8″ × 12″

I love to paint rainy, snowy, and foggy situations. Because of the pervasive moisture in the air, atmospheric effects such as these provide ready-made color harmonies. Tiny water droplets or flakes act as little prisms reflecting and repeating all of the light and color in a scene, super-saturating it with a single dominant note (Cobalt Blue in this case). The only problem was tactical: how to manage the weather. Painting in the rain isn't so bad if you are inside warm and dry—which I was here. This is one of several waterfront sketches I completed at Dingle Bay, Ireland in 1994. Nancy and I have various strategies to deal with weather on our travels; all of them involve getting in or under something to keep the canvas and palette dry. (We wear rain gear too.) For this sketch, I drove to the wharf edge at the little port of Dingle, and painted in the front seat of our small car with my canvas propped up on the steering wheel—quite a trick for someone my size.



"TRALEE CHOCOLATE SHOP" (Ireland) Oil 8″ × 12″

This is another example of how water can act to unify the color in a location—the wetness everywhere reflecting colors endlessly, creating a Cadmium Red harmony. Note however, that the primary and secondary colors—red, yellow, blue, green, orange, and violet—are all present, but only red, yellow, and orange, appear in a pure state. Yellow and orange stand out because they represent light sources within the shop, and are independent of the otherwise cooler dominant outdoor natural light. My set-up was across the street under an awning, and Nancy obliged me by posing briefly and rather demurely with her umbrella as the lovely Rose of Tralee in the rain.

In addition to giving us their pictures, some of the masters were both considerate and articulate enough to share their discoveries by teaching. (In America—Howard Pyle, Robert Henri, Cecilia Beaux, Thomas Eakins, John Twachtman, Andrew Loomis, to name a few.) So we know many valuable things, and we have a body of very useful and savvy knowledge to guide us, though it is not gathered in one book or school. We also have a limited (but effective enough) technical language to describe the properties and qualities of color, as well as many of its behavioral quirks. Despite the subjective character of color and the problems of description, there are many things about it that are not purely subjective, and they can be described and articulated rationally. There is far more common sense about color than mystery.

WHAT I KNOW *FOR SURE* ABOUT COLOR

I know this simple fact—when painting from life, all I have to do is correctly identify a color I see in my subject as a specific pigment or mixture of pigments, and then put that on my canvas in the right place. Nothing more—see it right—mix what I see right—and then stick it where it belongs.

The rest of what I know is about *how* to do that—which is what the remainder of this chapter is about. I begin with some general remarks about color and light, then get into the specifics of seeing color in a discerning way and matching what I see with appropriate pigments. "Sticking it in the right place" comes under the heading of Drawing (Chapter 4). I go into various ways of applying paint to get the most out of color and overcome some of its limitations. I also describe how to explore and understand a palette of colors, and then use that knowledge to help see the patches of color on a subject as simple mixtures. I must also mention that I will be dealing with color "temperature" in all sections because it permeates every aspect of this subject.

Before I get into the details about what to mix with what to get such and so, please give some attention to the next section so that you will have an understanding of why color behaves the way it does. It will spare you from trying the impossible. It is also very interesting.

COLOR AND LIGHT

The first time I saw color television I could hardly believe my eyes. It was the 1950s, I was in art school, and color TV was just coming onto the American market. Our family couldn't afford one, so I had to go to the Science museum in Chicago to see what they looked like. The images I saw on the small television screen then (as now) were crude up close, but fascinating—like small Pointillist paintings (in motion no less)—but far more brilliant. For a while (back then) I was stunned that electronic technology could so easily create the intensity and purity of color that I had been trying so unsuccessfully to obtain with my paints. It was depressing to see that skill wrenched from my domain by a gang of what I considered to be nerdy technicians. I was jealous,[5] but I was also learning something important.

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[5] Eventually, of course, I realized that, as wonderful as it was, TV was just another artificial view of reality, and it could not reproduce the way things really look to my eyes (my aim as a painter). TV and photography could only provide images that they were designed to record (and can't do anything at all when you pull the plug). I wanted to replicate what a human being (me) sees.

I discovered that color television was created with *light* instead of pigments, and that I could never match that alluring TV color with my paints no matter what I did. Why? Because what I was seeing on the screen was an illusion created with tiny bits of phosphorescence (light sources), something impossible to achieve with paint.

I also learned that this use of colored light (instead of pigments) to produce images is called "Additive color" because the hues are created by *adding* (and juxtaposing) one primary color of light to another. (Motion pictures and projected photography do essentially the same thing.)

We do something completely different in painting. We use pigments—which merely *reflect* light. The paints that we use absorb (subtract) certain wavelengths of the light they receive and reflect others. Red paint, for example, looks "red" because it absorbs all light rays except those in the red portion of the spectrum. Because of this, the color we work with is called "Subtractive color."

So the first lesson from my encounter with the wonders of television was about the big difference between creating images with light and painting pictures with pigment. It was (as it still is) this—when the three primary colors[6] of *LIGHT* are added together the result is white light—when all primary *PIGMENTS* are added together, the result is a nondescript warm gray. (Or "muckledydumb brown" as Bill Mosby called it.)

My second lesson was about what could and could not be done with my paints. I learned that even though I could not duplicate light itself, I nevertheless had to deal with sources of light in my subjects. Many of the things I attempted to paint consisted of colors that were the result of both additive and subtractive effects. In other words my subjects—city streets, landscapes, a figure in a room—often were combinations of both light SOURCES and REFLECTED light. In a typical landscape, the sky—glowing with diffracted sunlight—was a light source, and almost everything else was reflected light. Naturally, I couldn't make my paint glow like the phosphors on a TV screen, so there had to be another way. There was!

SHIFTY SOLUTIONS

Nature is often kind enough to present herself in manageable splendor; many times, however, her light intensity, high contrasts, and color temperature extremes make a literal painting impossible. Back in art school, when I was far enough along in my development to grasp what he was talking about, the Master introduced me to ways of manipulating pigments to achieve the *effect* of colors (in a subject) that were beyond the range of oil paints. As a result of what I learned, I understood things which had eluded me in some of the works of the Impressionists and other artists of that time.[7]

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6 The primary colors of light are red, blue, and green. Pigment primaries are red, blue, and yellow.

7 The period roughly between 1850 and 1920, particularly those Americans who had studied in Europe and returned home. (Childe Hassam, John Twachtman, Edmund Tarbell, Robert Vonnoh, W.M. Chase, and others.) For most of these artists, painting from life in direct sunlight was a central preoccupation, at least during their mature painting years. With many of their works available to me at the Chicago Art Institute and later, at other museums, I was able to glean as much from their failed attempts as from their successes.

I realized that they faced the same challenge as we do today, which is this—to effectively raise the value of a color without losing its intensity.[8] Our common problem stems from the fact that white is our lightest color, and we must often use it as the only way of achieving certain high-keyed colors. (We can't just turn up the brightness control.) Simply adding white to a color doesn't always do the job, however. Why? Because above a certain value, colors start looking "chalky." They appear more white and opaque, less "pigmented" or "saturated" with color. In lightening, we lose color.

A conspicuous example of this problem is the task of painting the brightness of an orange streak in a sunset without losing the "orangeness." The solution is to paint the *visual effect* of the orange streak rather than trying to capture the "true" individual colors out there in the sky and elsewhere. That is done by determining the *temperature relationship* of our streak relative to its surrounding colors—in other words, dealing with the question of how "hot" the streak is *compared* to everything else in sight. Often, simply cooling all other colors in the painting will make the streak look "hotter" (or at least require less orange in its mixture). This awareness of color temperature is the key to "seeing" color, because color temperature is what makes colors look the way they do. (And light temperature makes that happen, but more on that later.)

To sum this up—we must see the *RELATIONSHIP* between colors, the relative visual warmth or coldness of colors to one another in a complex visual field of many colors. The question to be asked in all cases is not what color something is, but rather what color it is *COMPARED TO ALL OTHERS AROUND IT.*

TEMPERATURE

Light temperature and the temperature of pigment colors are somewhat different concepts. *The temperature of a light source is a definite property that it bears.* Light sources can be described as cool or warm, or having a certain dominant temperature, according to which visible segment (or segments) of the electromagnetic spectrum they radiate, and which parts they do not. (The familiar color wheel in art books is a simplified diagram of the visible spectrum.) For example, when we say that a light source is "hot," we really mean that it is emitting very little radiation from the blue end of the spectrum and a lot in the red-yellow end. In more practical terms, if we were mixing paint to match the effects of hot light, we would probably rely heavily on the Cadmiums. In cool light we would use more blues.

Color temperature, on the other hand, is definitely *NOT* an intrinsic property of a pigment. It is how warm or cool a color *LOOKS* to us compared to its surrounding colors. It is a variable effect that fluctuates according to the ambient light and surroundings.[9] It is the degree of *difference* between colors rather than a specific warmth or coolness ordinarily associated with a color. Green, for example, may seem cool compared to red, but it looks warm next to blue. All of the colors in a subject shift in temperature whenever a major new color is introduced.

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8 Intensity, saturation, and chroma are terms that mean the same thing—how "red" a red *is* as opposed to *which* red a certain red is. Hue, family, shade, and tint refer to "which"—the orange-red, the purple-red, etc.

9 It is physically impossible for a single color to exist alone. (Except perhaps in the singularity prior to the "Big Bang," but then there would have been no eyes to see it.)



"SPINDLESTONE FARM" (Northumberland) Oil 20″ × 30″

Northumberland in northern England offers dramatic skies and color effects similar to those of our Maine coast. Winds blow scudding clouds in fascinating patterns, predominantly from east to west across the wheat and barley fields—fairly begging to be painted. An interesting thing to watch for in landscape painting, when the clouds of an overcast sky are low, is the influence of ground color on the sky (as in this painting). The vast golden color of the fields reflected upward, warming the undersides of the clouds. I have seen this same phenomenon in Kansas and Nebraska—a curious reversal of the usual order in which the light from the sky normally creates the ambient harmony. Nature is full of wonderful tricks; don't ever take her for granted.

For our purposes it isn't how color "feels" physically or emotionally either, although that is probably the origin of the concept. My guess is that our ancestors associated orange, yellow, and red with the warmth of sunlight and firelight; blues and purples may have been connected to things like coldness and death. Whatever the associations were, the idea that reds and yellows are intrinsically "hot" or "warm," and blues are "cool" or "cold," has crept into our everyday language and thinking.

For convenient descriptive purposes, however, we still identify cool pigments as those that lean toward blue, and warm pigments as leaning to red or yellow. Mixtures that have white in them are also considered to be cooled. Ahead, under MIXING IT RIGHT, I describe how to acquire a clear grasp of pigments and their temperature relationships to one another. First, however, it is necessary to go into the role of light temperature as it affects colors in a subject.

SEEING IT RIGHT

Local colors in my subject are powerfully influenced by the temperature of the light, so my first job is to find out if the light is warm or cool. I try to identify the temperature of the light on the subject *before* I start to paint, and then stick to that temperature relationship throughout the entire course of my painting—*no matter what!* (Assuming I got it right.)

For me that is not a big problem because I've been doing it for a long time, and by now I know which light sources are going to be warm, and which are likely to be cool. Some familiar sources of warm light are: direct sunlight, incandescent lamps, candlelight, firelight, etc. Examples of cool light are: north daylight, 5500k[10] (and above), fluorescent lamps, moonlight, certain types of street lighting and some photographic lamps.

THE GREAT (AND ALMOST PERFECT) COLOR LAW

If for some reason I cannot decide the temperature of my light source, there is a very handy fact about light and shadow to help me—*cool light produces warm shadows, and warm light produces cool shadows*—so all I have to do is look at the shadows on my subject! If they are warmer (containing reds or yellows) than the light areas, then the light source must be cool. If the shadows are cooler (containing more blue) than the light areas, I know that my light source is warm!

If there is any doubt, if the temperature difference between the light and shadow is too subtle to make a clear distinction, there is a sure-fire way to determine the temperature of a shadow. I place a small sheet of white paper or cloth in with the subject, or in the same light, and then place an object on the white paper to cast a shadow. The temperature of that cast shadow will be clearly either cooler or warmer than the unshaded area of the paper. Of course I can always cheat by using a photo color meter, but that merely reveals what the meter is measuring, not how *I* am seeing the light. There is a big difference; I am far more than merely a recording device.

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10 The "k" in 5500k refers (in Physics) to the Kelvin scale of absolute temperature. Lighting engineers rate light in "k" degrees. Photoflood bulbs are about 5000k, household bulbs about 4500k. Clear blue-sky daylight is around 7500k. In real terms then, the warmer a light appears visually, the cooler it is in actual physical temperature. Curious isn't it, how we got it all backwards?

LOOPHOLES

This cool light—warm darks, and warm light—cool darks phenomenon is probably as close to a "color law" as I know of. Nature, alas (or fortunately), is never wholly cooperative, and there are a few odd circumstances when the principle fails, mostly when light is traveling through a more or less transparent substance (like water), or when there are peculiar reflections bouncing around. In such cases a warm light (such as a tungsten bulb) may produce even warmer shadows, or cold shadows may show up in cool north daylight. Such occurrences, however, usually happen in isolated parts of the overall subject.

Still, I have to be on the alert for surprises. I have seen colors in nature that I could never have imagined—like the blue of the Mediterranean in bright sunlight, and the deep ultramarine in the crevasses of Alaska's monstrous glaciers. In such cases (as in life), nature calls the shots and explanations are pointless—just do it—paint it the way it looks as best you can, and don't try to figure it out. Remember also, that such things are after all, exceptions. Ninety-nine percent of what is out there will follow the "rule."

YOUR WORKING LIGHT—GOOD AND BAD

There is no "bad" light. Some light is just easier to work in than others. I once demonstrated a still life painting before an audience, with only a pink spotlight to work by. Under that ghastly illumination, my reds and yellows looked gray, blues and greens appeared black, and so on. It was a color nightmare. The result though was fascinating (for want of a better word), because I had no true idea of what I was doing. It wasn't a bad picture, because it was well-drawn, but when I saw it under normal light, it was not what I thought I had painted. It was definitely a learning experience. The point is that at least I came up with something—which wouldn't have happened if there were no light at all.

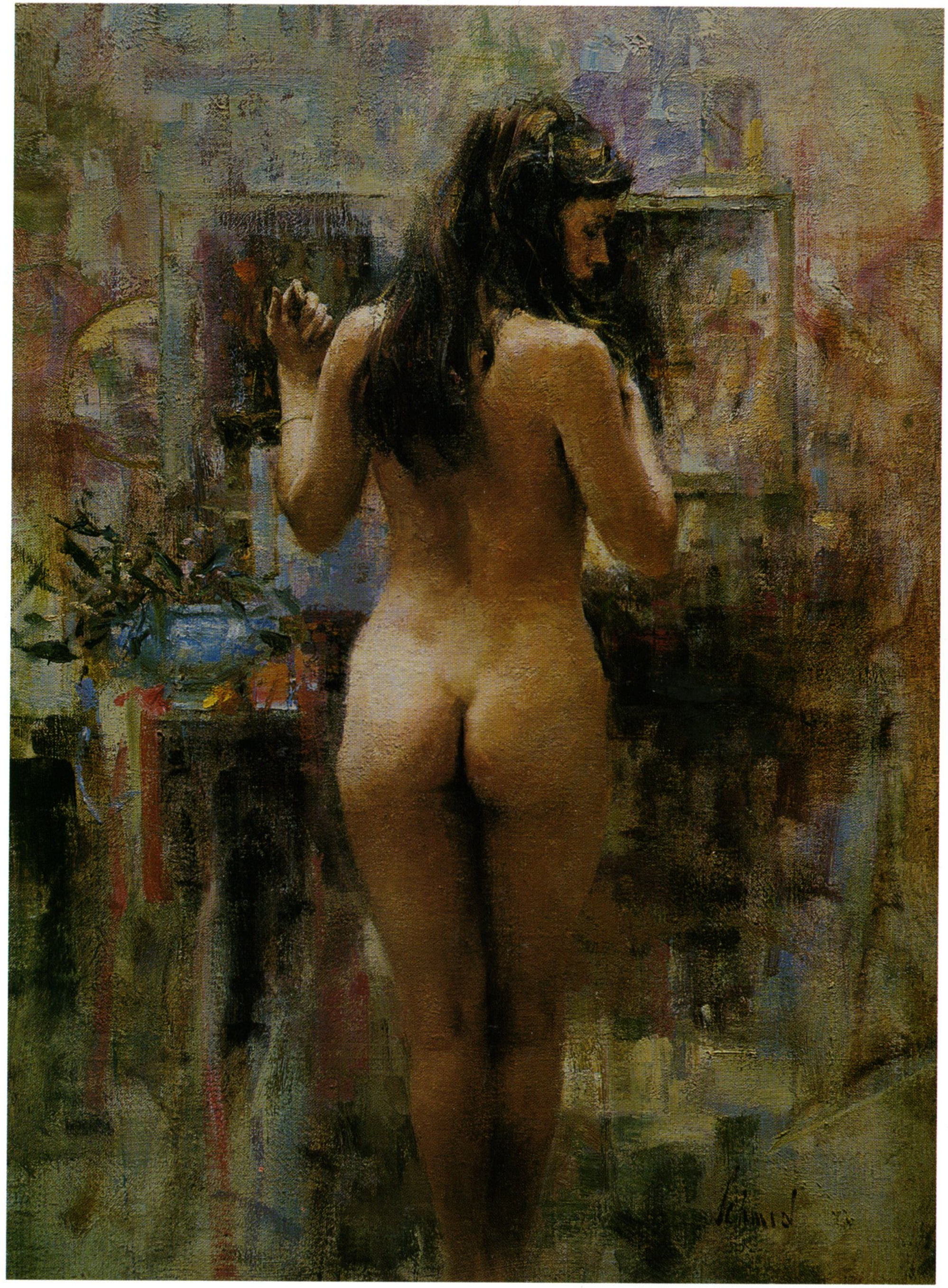
For serious painting, at the very minimum you need to be able to see your subject and canvas well enough to paint without guessing at the colors.[11] Your light should be steady too—the same average brightness throughout your working period. When illumination diminishes gradually, as often happens with natural light, your perception of dark colors fails before your perception of light colors, so that you might not notice. The ideal light to work with is a source that provides nearly (but not quite equal) amounts of the visible spectrum—in other words, almost equal measures of red, yellow, and blue. I say "almost equal" because, in my experience, the conditions are more interesting if one color is slightly dominant. It is also much easier to identify the light temperature if one color stands out.

My idea of perfect light for painting (outdoors or in my studio) is a high bright overcast in the summer during the middle hours of the day. Why summertime? Because the days are longer and the sun is higher in the sky. Why overcast? Because sunlight is diffused evenly throughout the cloud layer, and it produces the near perfect color balance that I mentioned above. Overcast also tends to be stable, providing generous time for painting. Often the light during an overcast day is so evenly balanced that the temperature of the light and shadow will be nearly identical. I find that very challenging.

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11 If Hollywood movies can be believed, Van Gogh painted along the Seine at night with candles stuck on the brim of his hat. (*Lust For Life,* 1956.) If that were really true, it might explain some of his use of color.

Because our human skin tones are so subtle, extra care must be taken in figure painting to maintain a consistent temperature relationship between darks and lights in order to avoid the appearance of "muddy" color. In cool light, such as this, I need to know more than that the lights are cool and the darks warm. I must also know *how much cooler and warmer they are.* It is the *degree* of difference that matters. Remember, "bad" color is simply inappropriate color—mixtures that are either too warm or too cool for the spot I am placing them in—a shadow, for example, that abruptly becomes too hot, or not hot enough. There is no formula for this, because how warm or cool to mix is always a matter of judgment, and then comparison to the model—that, in turn requires discipline, experience, and patience. The only thing I have seen virtually without exception, is that the darkest darks in a figure, and most other things, are very warm—warmer than any other colors within any shadow.



"NUDE"
Oil 28″ × 20″

A painting done under such conditions will look good under almost any subsequent light, but a work done under *extremes* of hot or cold light will usually appear correct only under the same lighting conditions. For example, a painting done while bright sunlight is on the canvas will look very different when brought indoors. When painting in sunlight is unavoidable, at least try to have *both* your palette and canvas in the sun. (So the colors you mix on your palette will look the same on your picture.) Here is a little tip for outdoor painting, especially in sunlight—wear dark clothing. A white shirt will reflect on a canvas, or on the wet surface of a watercolor, causing disturbing glare, particularly in the darker values of your work.

Painting in bright sun causes two other problems (not to mention sunburn). First, the pupils of your eyes close down to pinpoints, which causes you to see less color. Second, the extreme brightness makes your mixtures appear much lighter in value. That, in turn, causes you to overcompensate by mixing your paints too dark in value. The result, when you see your work under ordinary light, will usually be a surprisingly dark painting. The simple solution is to have a big, well-anchored umbrella handy. (Even if you do feel silly sitting under it when it's not raining, it's worth it.) When you see old photos of Sargent, Monet, and others painting outdoors, they always had a big white umbrella under the noonday sun, unlike mad dogs and Englishmen.

ARTIFICIAL LIGHT

If you must paint by artificial light (and most of us have at times—or all the time), the 5500k fluorescent lamps that I mentioned are the best source. I use twelve 40 watt fluorescent tubes, available from any lighting supply store. They are adequately balanced and even steadier than daylight, but they do lack (somewhat) the softer, more diffused quality of natural light. Also their effective brightness diminishes with even short distances away from them. (With the square of the distance, to be exact.) Their actual light output does not change until they near the end of their life, about 24,000 hours. If your ceiling will allow it, the ideal height of the light fixtures above the studio floor should be about 12 feet.

I don't recommend ordinary (tungsten) light bulbs to paint by unless there is no other choice. Their color balance is so weighted toward yellow-orange that the blue family of colors is sharply reduced. Blues, violets, and greens will all appear less intense than they would be in more balanced lighting. As a result, paintings done under tungsten light often appear to have their cool colors exaggerated when viewed in a better light. Tungsten bulbs also produce very pronounced shadows with hard edges. If that is a problem, paint your ceiling a bright cool white, and bounce your lights off of it for a more diffused illumination.

If color is not important to you, it doesn't matter what light you use as long as you can see what you are doing.[12]

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12 You think you have problems with light? Imagine how difficult it must have been for painters in the past! Today, we have the advantage of sophisticated controlled electrical lighting, but they had only natural light for daytime (over which they had no control). When daylight faded, their choices were dismal—torches, candles, oil lamps, and later, gaslight—all of them firelight in one form or another. Few artists, however, painted after sundown, preferring in their evenings to do drawings or other things not requiring color (serious drinking perhaps, and whatever). Artists in those bygone days were the earliest of risers, getting up at the crack of dawn, despite hangovers, to take full advantage of daylight.

HOW LIGHT WORKS WITH AND AGAINST COLOR

This is a modest little point, but it is important to know. Let us go back to the fact that in many cases, adding white to a color is the only way of making it lighter. So far so good, but what also happens is this—when we add white to any color or mixture, we also cool it. This happens because white is the "coldest" pigment on our palette. It lowers the "saturation" of any color it is mixed with. Fortunately, this works to our advantage when we work in cool light because colors on a subject get cooler as they get lighter—the same thing that happens when white pigment is added to colors. Cool light then works *with* our mixtures. This is one of the reasons why many artists prefer cool overcast north daylight.

Warm or hot light on the other hand, works *against* our mixtures when we have to lighten them. Why? Because the colors in our subject get warmer as they get lighter, and since we usually cannot avoid using white to lighten mixtures, we have a problem keeping those mixtures warm as we lighten them. We must constantly compensate for the cooling effect of white by also introducing yellows and reds when raising values.

Extremely bright high-contrast light also poses color problems. For one thing, our pupils contract, and we tend to squint (as I described in sunlight painting), preventing us from seeing all the colors available in our subjects (particularly in the darks). Moreover, when we are facing directly into a bright light or our subject is back-lit, most of the middle tones diminish (the silhouette effect), and all we see is glare and shadow. For this reason, high-contrast situations tend to result in less colorful paintings.

More moderate light, such as diffused overcast daylight, cooperates best of all with our seeing, our subject, and our paint. Our eyes relax to let in even the subtlest of tones. The colors in the subject, as well as our pigments, appear in their natural strength. Because colors are at their highest levels of intensity in the middle-to-light range of values, we can match the colors we see effortlessly.



"KING RICHARD'S FAIRE"
(Illinois)
Oil 8″ × 12″

MIXING IT RIGHT

To mix the color I want, I must have a basic set of pigments, and I must know what will happen when I mix them together. Let's look at these two items one at a time.

1. **My current palette:**
   Cadmium Lemon
   Cadmium Yellow Pale
   Cadmium Yellow Deep
   Yellow Ochre Light (This can vary greatly in value depending on brand.)
   Cadmium Red
   Terra Rosa
   Alizarin Crimson
   Transparent Oxide Red[13]
   Viridian
   Cobalt Blue Light
   Ultramarine Blue Deep
   Titanium White

With these few colors I can duplicate virtually all the other manufactured colors (at least those worth bothering with), so it is unnecessary to take up palette space with more paints. Strictly speaking, I don't really need Cadmium Yellow Deep, Yellow Ochre Light, or Terra Rosa, since all of those can be mixed from the remaining colors, but I use them so much that it is more convenient to just squeeze them from a tube. For the same reason, I often put Cadmium Scarlet for a warmer red, and Cadmium Orange, on my palette when I'm working in warm light. Occasionally, I add either Cobalt Violet light or dark (Genuine) to my palette when I need a high-keyed Violet or Purple, because Alizarin plus Blue mixtures are unstable in very light values. (The Alizarin fades in sunlight.) Cobalt Violet is unusually expensive compared to most other pigments, which always makes me nervous, so I use it sparingly. Its high price is probably a good thing because it curbs the temptation to use it indiscriminately.

I use Ivory Black, but very seldom, and never alone (it cracks). I prefer to mix my own versions of black with a combination of other colors such as Ultramarine Blue plus Alizarin Crimson plus Transparent Oxide Red. These "blacks" yield a deeper black with a more distinctive color temperature. (Alizarin shows no noticeable fading in very dark mixtures.)

My preference is to keep my palette selection simple and basic—the fewest colors I need. The ones I have listed constitute a classic group of pigments to which other colors can be added, removed, or substituted to fit special circumstances.

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13 Transparent Oxide Red replaces the Burnt Sienna Deep that I used for many years as the brown on my palette. It is permanent, darker, and more transparent.

2. **Mixing color**

Actual painting begins when I have identified the color I see in my subject and start dipping into the little piles of paint. How do I know what to mix with what to get what I want? In my case, I had to be taught how to do that. My initiation into the world of color began forty-some years ago, when I first entered Bill Mosby's class at the old American Academy of Art.

I already knew a few things—that red and yellow made orange; yellow and blue made green; violet was blue and red; white or black made things lighter or darker; and that mixing everything together made gray, or brown, or mud—but that was the extent of my color knowledge even though I'd been fooling with oil paints since I was fourteen. Some earlier instruction (and nonstop trial and error) had given me an inkling of color theory—just enough, however, to screw up, which I did. Mosby liked to describe my efforts as being like those of a rookie pitcher—lots of speed, but no control! I really loved him like a father to stick with him. There were many dropouts in his class.

Before I was allowed to paint from the model, he suggested (commanded) that I do the legendary color charts—an exercise designed to exhaust the possible color mixtures of my palette. The charts (a traditional Flemish method of teaching color) were his way of showing me just what I was getting myself into. His initial assessment of my color skills indicated that it was ludicrous for me to begin painting until I understood my paints.[14] To that end, I was introduced to a rational palette of colors and shown how to mix each of the pigments methodically with all the others (only nine). The purpose was to see, understand, and remember how they behaved. Then I had to blend white into those mixtures and render each out to five values.[15]

It was not something that could be done by rote. The charts had to be executed with breathless concentration if they were to come out right. Mosby hovered over me all the while, waiting to pounce if I got the color mixtures even slightly wrong, or if my values failed to graduate with perfect uniformity. To make it harder (I thought), he made me do it all with a palette knife. I was clumsy with the knife at the beginning—a bricklayer could have done better with his trowel—but in the end I was wielding that knife like a Ninja swordsman. Thus, in doing the charts, I also acquired a new tool, one I have treasured ever since. Mosby was a smart guy.

Surprisingly, the charts took only two weeks to complete, and when I finished I knew more about my paint than I had ever thought possible. It was an astonishing experience—imagine being taken into the kitchen of a great chef and shown everything he could do with flavors—that was what it was like for me! There was nothing tedious or boring about doing the charts; each was a revelation of the power that awaited me when I did start painting.

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14 He was right. Also, he was not receptive (to put it mildly) to the idea that some people have a natural sense of color. He thought you had to *work* at it. So do I.

15 I have done the charts several times again over the years. Each new rendering has given me fresh insights about color. I did not think that was possible, but undoubtedly my interim experience had something to do with it—very much like any practicing professional returning to school often realizes more enriched understanding than a beginner.

Many of my fellow students regarded the charts then (and now) as just an ordeal to be dispatched with as quickly as possible, or simply bypassed for a crack at the more serious business of creating Art. In their impatience to get to painting, they missed the point that it was the *doing* of the charts and *how* they were done that mattered. I was lucky because I enjoyed doing them. I thought they were fun, like making cake frosting and getting to eat it all instead of just licking the pan. No tummyache either, just deliriously beautiful color! The meticulous attempt to my colors perfect gave me not only a grasp of the potential in my palette, but the ability to unerringly mix any color I needed—without guesswork.

DOING THE CHARTS

This is about creating the charts with oil paint, but they can be done with any medium you wish—watercolor, pastel, acrylic, etc. Regardless of the medium, doing them will enhance your understanding of how color behaves, even with materials that you are very familiar with.

If you are like me, you will use the charts constantly as a reference when you paint, so do them on a durable surface, one that will stand up to many years of service. ⅛″ masonite or heavy illustration board coated to a bright even white with acrylic gesso are good choices. Canvas boards with an added coat of acrylic white also serve well. Whatever surface you choose, avoid using white lead as a ground because it yellows with age. I did the charts for this book on 8″ × 15″ panels with one inch color squares—larger than that is too cumbersome when using the charts, and smaller is insufficient for color recognition. The squares here were laid out with strips of ¼″ *removable* tape. I recommend peeling away the tape as soon as you are satisfied with the mixtures, and while the paint is still wet. (Removing the tape after the paint has dried is agony.) If you wish to correct your charts at a later date, you can always put tape back on.

While the charts are drying, put them where the cat won't step on them. When they are thoroughly dry (three months minimum for oil paint), give them a light coat or spray of acrylic picture varnish. Do not use Damar varnish or other natural resins. They yellow and darken with time, causing a very noticeable change in the delicate light values.

Here are the chart basics (using my palette colors as an example), along with my comments:

1. The top row across each chart is pigment as it comes from the tube (without white). The vertical columns are those same pigments or mixtures with white added in increasing amounts, like a little value scale for each color. I use five values here, but some prefer seven because the steps between them seem more even, particularly with the darker colors.

2. The bottom row should be just off white—the lightest value possible while still remaining identifiable as a color.

3. The middle row must be the value half-way between the top and bottom rows. Notice that this will vary because the values in the top row range from very light (Cadmium Lemon), to very dark (Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine Blue, etc.).

4. The second and fourth rows are also half-way values between the middle row and the top and bottom row.

5. The first chart is simply each pigment as it appears on your palette—one square apiece across the top—then each lightened down to make five values. So far so good!

6. The second chart is Cadmium Lemon (CL)[16] mixed with each other palette color (top row), with the Cadmium Lemon *predominating*. Thus the top squares are: 1.CL alone. 2.CL+Cad.Yellow Pale. 3.CL+Cad.Yellow Deep. 4.CL+Cad.Red. 5.CL+Terra Rosa. 6.CL+Alizarin Crimson, and so on through Ultramarine Blue. The top mixtures are then, each in turn, lightened with white down to five values.

7. The third chart is Cadmium Yellow Pale predominating; the fourth chart is Cadmium Yellow Deep predominant; the fifth, Yellow Ochre Light; then Cadmium Red, Terra Rosa, and so on until each color has been mixed with every other and rendered to five values. Still with me? If not, look at the charts in the next pages, and it will all make sense!

Care must be taken to avoid exactly *equal* mixtures. The signature color of each chart—for example, Cadmium Red in the Cadmium Red chart—should predominate, yet it should not saturate the entire chart to the point that you cannot tell which other color has been mixed with it. With some colors it is not possible to make clear distinctions, particularly between the light Cadmium Yellows, or mixtures of Cobalt Blue and Ultramarine. Colors that are very similar to begin with lose their individual identity when mixed together, and as you will discover, those mixtures become even more ambiguous as they get lighter with the introduction of white—but these are some of the valuable things you will learn.

OTHER THINGS YOU WILL LEARN

The first and most obvious thing you will notice doing the charts is that each appears to be an almost perfect harmony of colors (with the exception of the first one). You will understand as you go along how the predominance of a single color in all mixtures easily achieves a unifying effect. It is an exaggerated effect to be sure, one that illustrators have exploited for generations, but it is valid nevertheless because it dramatically demonstrates the powerful role of a common denominator (such as light) in producing color harmony. The charts will give you information to fully understand the discussion of color harmony later in this chapter.

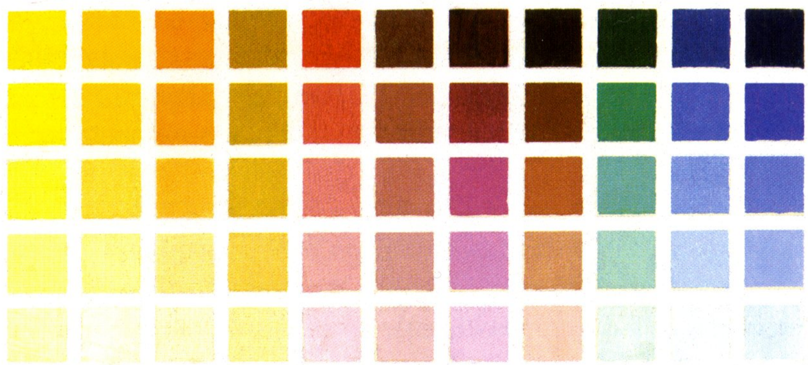
Here are a few more things to observe:

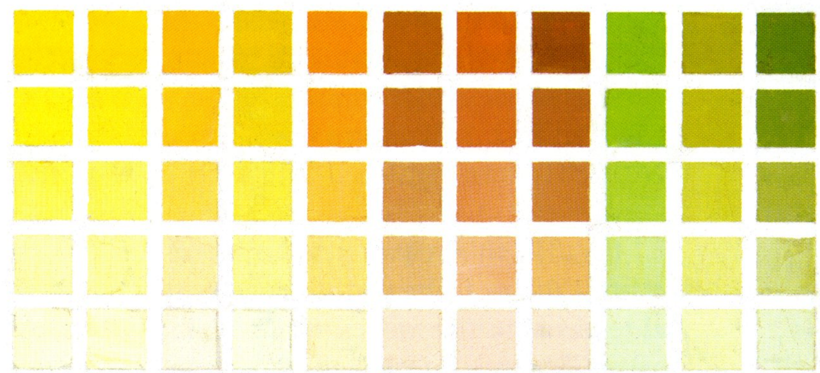
1. How the addition of white *changes* mixtures beyond merely lightening them. It creates a new, cooler, color.
2. How certain extremely dark colors are hard to identify until white is added to them.
3. How harmony among all colors increases with the addition of white.
4. How most colors appear more vivid in the mid-value range.

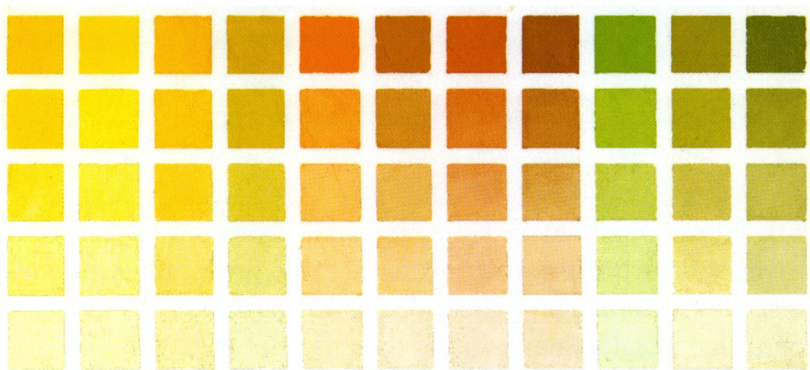
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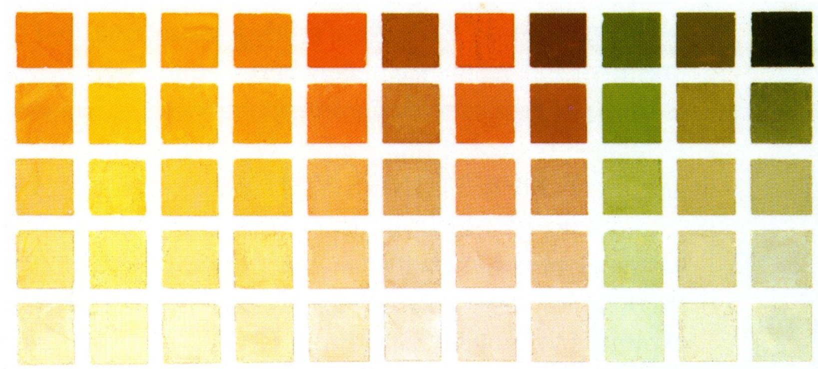
16 The initials used to designate colors on the charts are as follows: Cadmium Lemon=CL; Cadmium Yellow Pale=CYP; Cadmium Yellow Deep=CYD; Yellow Ochre Light=YO; Cadmium Red=CR; Terra Rosa=TR; Alizarin Crimson=A; Transparent Oxide Red=TOR; Viridian=V; Cobalt Blue Light=CO; Ultramarine Blue Deep=U.

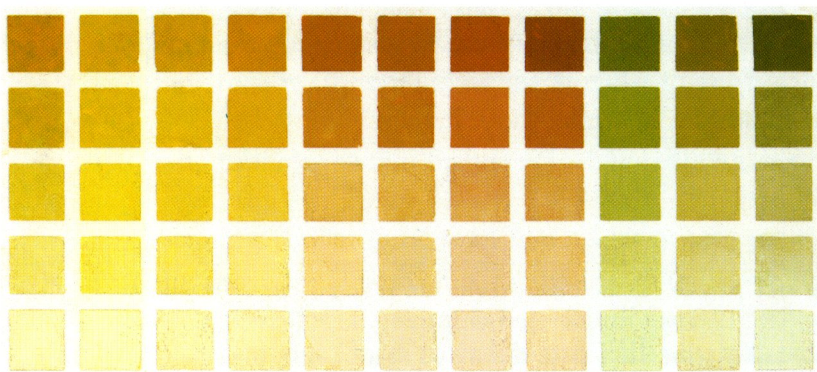
COLOR CHARTS

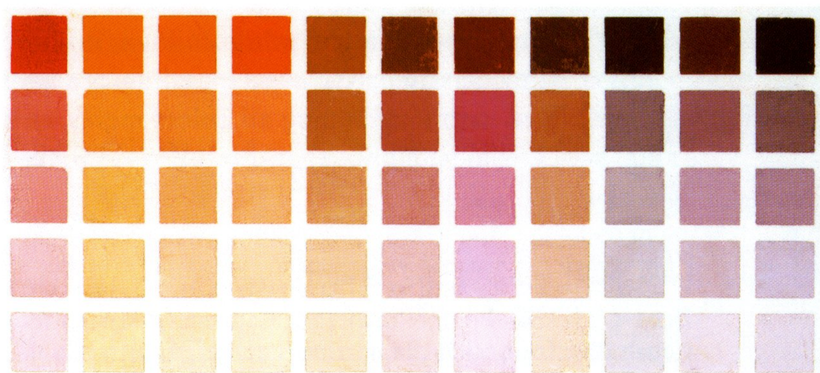




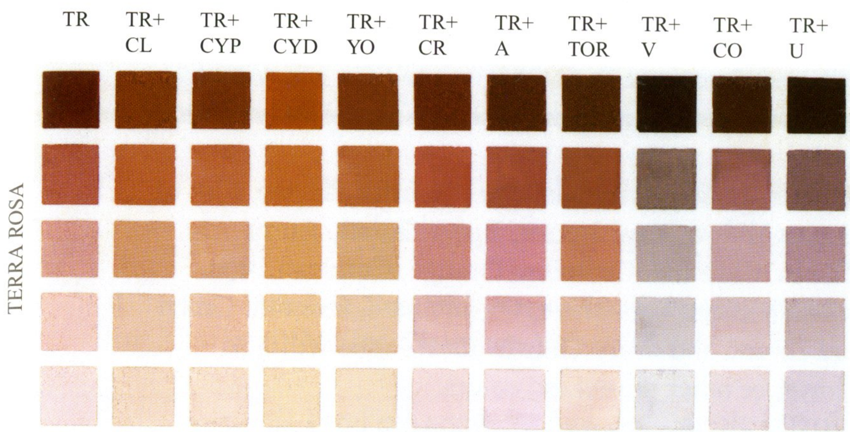


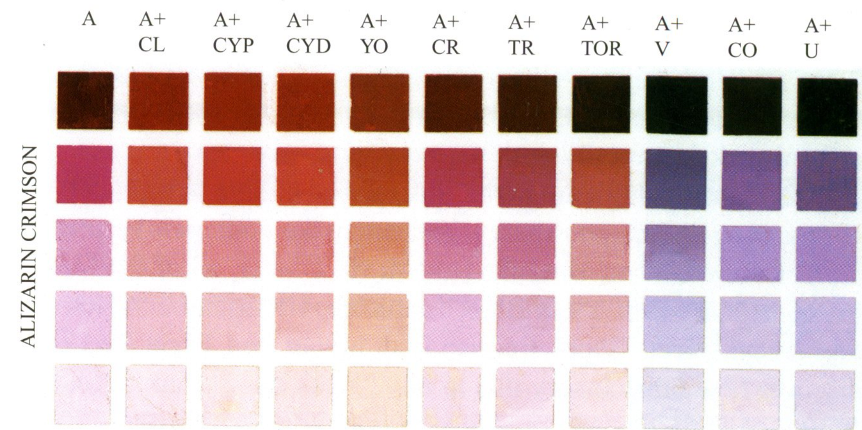


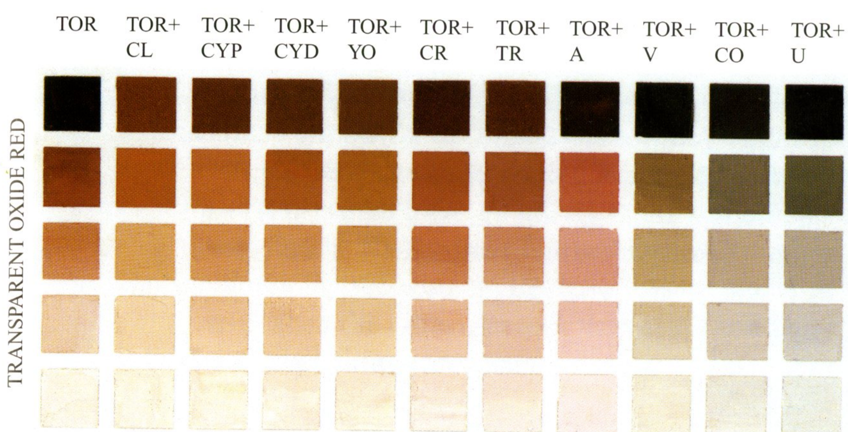


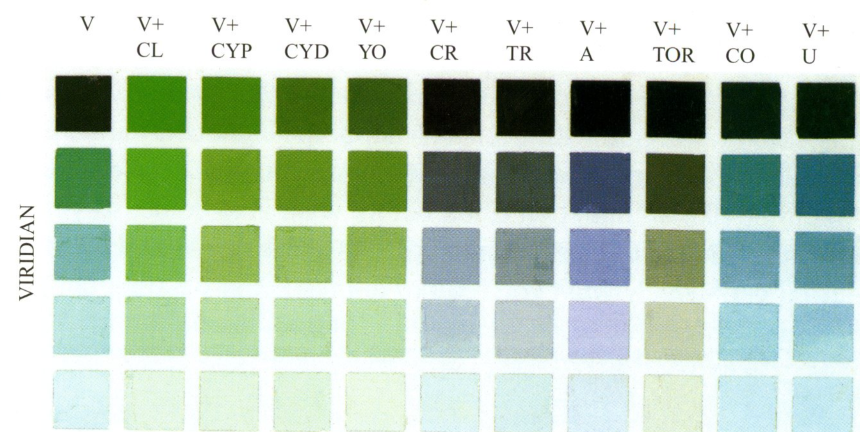


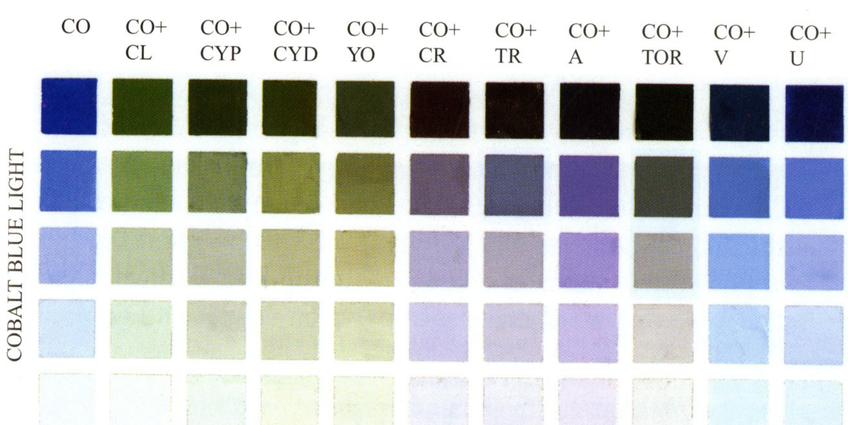
COLOR CHARTS

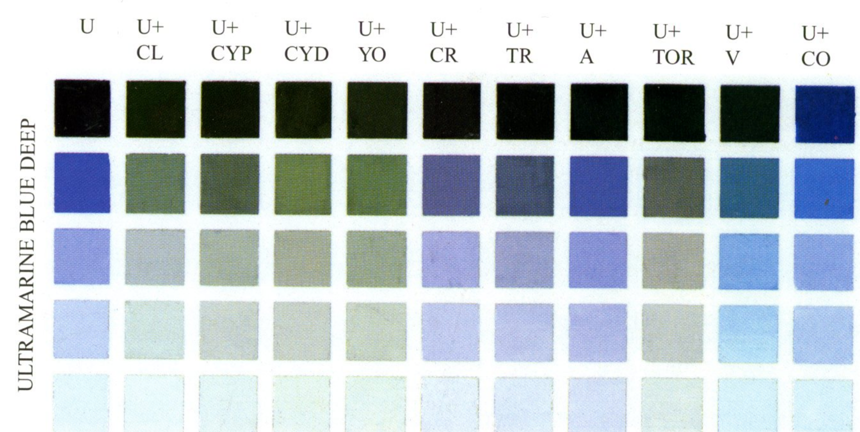












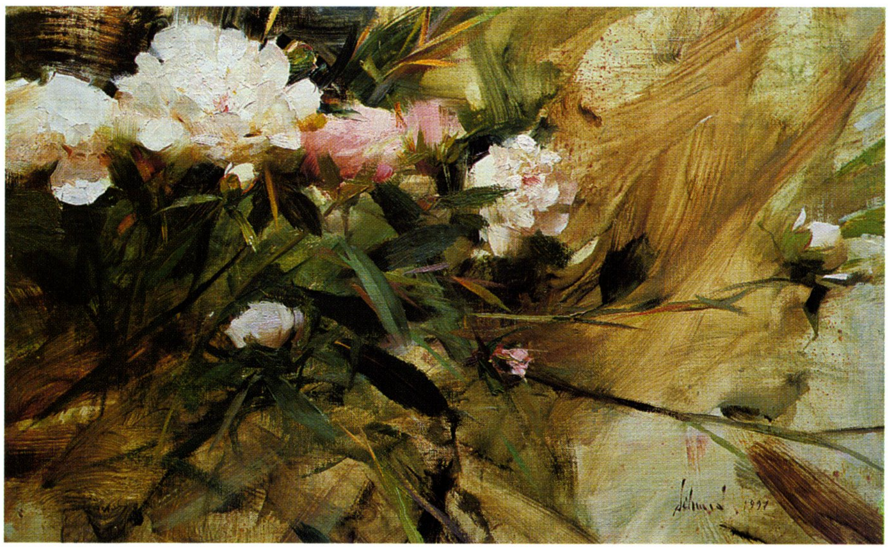
5. How some mixtures yield surprising results—for example, that Viridian plus Cadmium Red (or Alizarin) produces interesting violets and purples, and that many mixtures duplicate one another.

6. How pigments vary in transparency, opacity, tinting strength, and drying time.

7. How easy it is to contaminate mixtures unless you keep your brush, your knife, and palette scrupulously clean as you work (especially with the very light mixtures).

8. How simple it is with this modest palette to replicate nearly all other colors sold as tube pigments (saving a lot of your money and palette space). You can make your own Vermilion, Naples Yellow, Raw Sienna, Burnt Sienna, Burnt Umber, Raw Umber, Vandyke Brown, the Blacks, all of the Madder Lakes, Carmine, Cadmium Orange, Cerulean Blue, Prussian Blue, Permanent Blue, Turquoise, Ultramarine Violet, the Cobalt Violets, Sap Green, Olive Green, Emerald Green, Permanent Green, Sepia, English Red, Indian Red, Light Red, the Mars colors, and every Gray available. You will also discover how unnecessary it is to buy "Flesh tints," Pink, "Neutral" Grays, or other pre-mixed colors.

My advice—my plea to you—is to do the charts for your sake. (Do not use mine.) The charts are not a sure-fire gimmick guaranteed to make you a color wizard, but they are the best way I know of to understand your pigments and enter the study of color on sound footing. Take your time, don't be in a rush just to get them done. Stay alert and see what is happening, not only on your palette, but *within yourself.* Impatience will well up, so will exasperation as you make mistakes or struggle with decisions about the right color and value, but I urge you to stick with it. In a way, the charts are intended to be somewhat agonizing so that you will develop the patience and self-control so necessary in painting. It should be like an initiation ritual before what is to come, so you may endure it without giving up. As a dancer learns to tolerate pain and endless falls in order to some day soar with grace, so must you have the stubbornness to mix a color until it is precisely what you require to make your painting sing.



Color harmony need not be complicated or analytical. It can be quickly established by applying a wash of a key color (Cobalt Blue and Yellow Ochre Light in this picture), and then matching *that* temperature and relating to *that* color family in the course of the painting. "Relating" simply means constantly checking to see that each color laid down matches the color in the subject, and making sure that the shadows and light areas are appropriately warm and cool—"appropriately" means having the *same* degree of difference between warms and cools.

"PEONIES" Oil 13″ × 21″

COLOR FAMILIES

In the same way that a chemistry student learns the Table of the Elements, or a music student learns scales and acquires the vital understanding of key signatures, so the doing of the charts taught me to recognize colors in an organized way as "families." For example, my pigments *as* they came from their tubes could be understood as:

1. The *Primary* color families—one color alone—red, yellow, and blue (Cadmium Red, Cadmium Yellow Pale, and Cobalt Blue).

2. The *Secondary* color families—two primary colors mixed together—green, violet, and orange (Viridian, Cobalt Violet, Cadmium Yellow Deep).

3. The *Tertiary* color families—all three primary colors mixed together—all the grays, browns and earth colors (Transparent Oxide Red, Yellow Ochre, Terra Rosa).

4. The remaining pigments—Alizarin Crimson, Cadmium Lemon, and Ultramarine Blue are clearly within the red, yellow and blue families respectively. Each however, leans slightly toward another color—Alizarin Crimson towards blue, Cadmium Lemon towards green, and Ultramarine Blue towards red.[17]

So what's the point? Aren't the names of the colors on the tubes? Well yes they are, but names don't mean anything. By recognizing my colors as members of family groups, I understand them in a more organized and useful way. I have taken the fifteen or so colors that I use and sorted them into three families. Three is easier to manage than fifteen. I like it when things are easier.

I sorted my pigments in other ways too:

1. The Reds—Cadmium Red, Cadmium Scarlet, Terra Rosa, and Alizarin Crimson.

2. The Yellows—Yellow Ochre Light, Cadmium Lemon, Cadmium Yellow Pale, and Cadmium Yellow Deep (because it inclines more towards Yellow than towards Red).

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17 My palette, and the way I identify my colors here, is somewhat different from the description I gave in my earlier books (*Richard Schmid Paints The Figure*—1973, and *Richard Schmid Paints Landscapes*—1975, both published by Watson-Guptill). What I offer here is a clearer and more comprehensive explanation, reflecting my further adventures with color in the intervening years, as well as the minor changes to my palette.

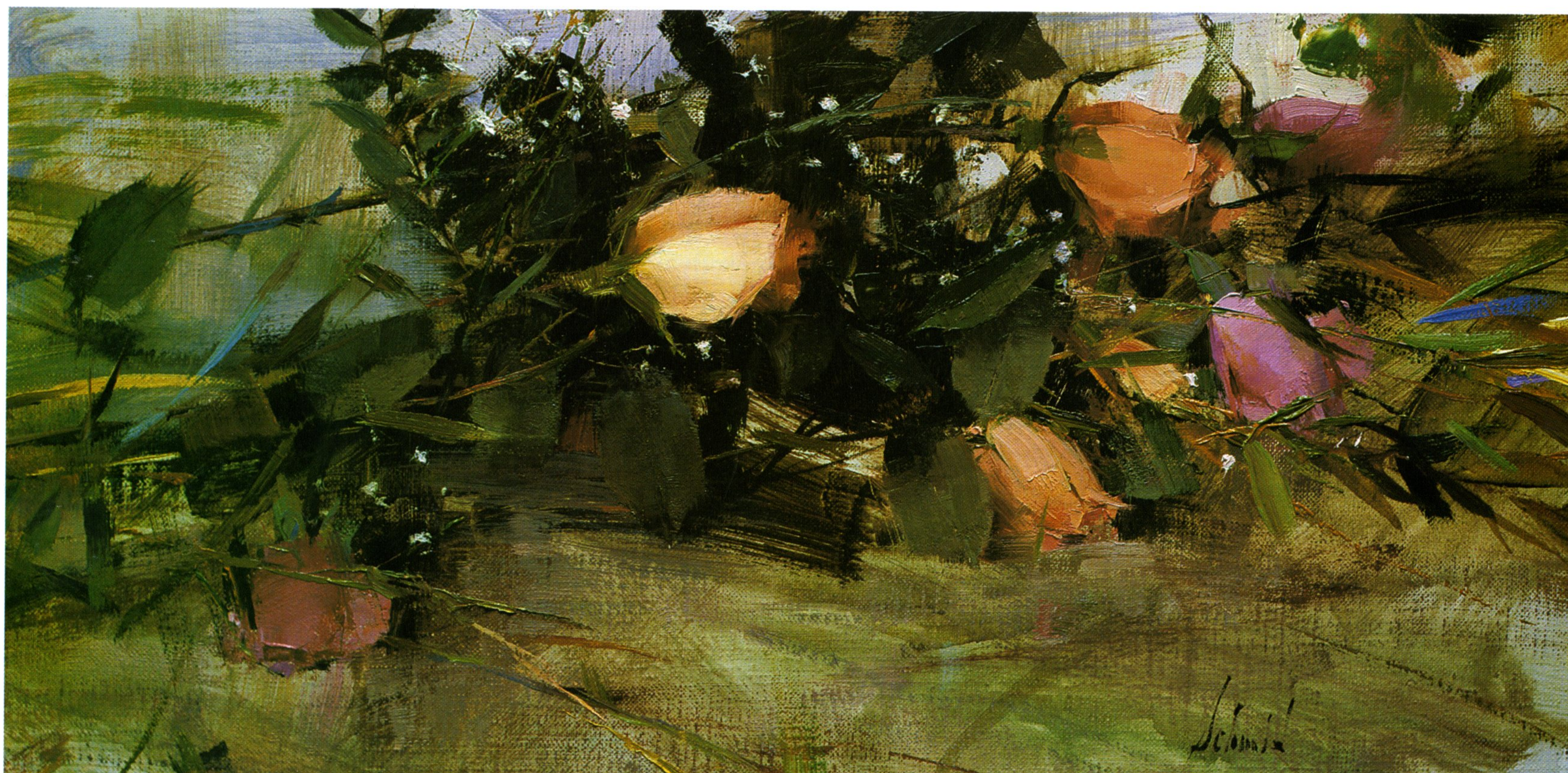
3. The Blues—Cobalt Blue, Ultramarine Blue.

4. Orange—Cadmium Orange.

5. Green—Viridian.

6. Violet—Cobalt Violet.

7. Brown—Transparent Oxide Red. (Technically, this could also be considered a Red or Orange when used transparently, or when lightened with white, but it still looks brown to me as it comes from its tube.)



"ROSES" Oil 8″ × 16″

PREDOMINANCE

Taking things another step, I organized the lists above into a still more sophisticated and comprehensive arrangement. The following is how I grouped my charts into families of *predominance.* I did that so I could recognize which family a mixture (or a color in nature) belonged to. I arranged my completed charts according to the color family that stood out—no matter which pigments on my palette were mixed together (including white). This is what I came up with, and it is how I think of color today:

1. **Red dominant family**—Any mixture in which Cadmium Red, Cadmium Scarlet, Terra Rosa, or Alizarin Crimson strongly prevails.

2. **Yellow dominant family**—Any mixture in which Cadmium Lemon, Cadmium Yellow, or Yellow Ochre Light strongly prevails.

3. **Blue dominant family**—Any mixture in which Cobalt Blue or Ultramarine Blue strongly prevails.

These are harder:

4. **Orange dominant family**
   a. Any mixture in which Cadmium Orange prevails.
   b. Any combination of the yellows and reds that leans *moderately* toward either red or yellow (without slipping over completely into either the red or yellow families).
   c. Any addition of *any* other color to the orange mixture above, that leaves orange predominating even slightly.
5. **Green dominant family**
   a. Any mixture where Viridian predominates.
   b. Any combination of the blues and yellows that leans *moderately* toward either blue or yellow (without slipping over completely into either the blue or yellow families).
   c. Any addition of *any* other color to the green mixture above, that leaves green predominating even slightly.
6. **Violet dominant family**
   a. Any mixture with Cobalt Violet predominant.
   b. Any mixture of the blues and reds that tends *moderately* toward either blue or red (without actually sliding completely into the blue or red families).
   c. Any addition of *any* other color to the violet mixture above, that leaves violet predominating even slightly.



In many of the evening studies I did at the Palette & Chisel Academy in the 1980s, my main interest was improving my drawing skills. As a consequence, in this, and many others, I was not overly concerned with dazzling color. I was more interested to experiment with edges, to achieve simple strong values, and to fit it all together properly. I was happy to settle for what I call adequate color—it was *her* coloration, but not all of it—not everything I actually saw. In a way, by limiting my color to just the essentials, it was an added learning experience, because it forced me to see the major predominant colors immediately—which is exactly what is needed for a sound block-in.

"ACADEMY STUDY"
Oil 22″ × 18″

In case you think I was (or am) a fanatic about making dry analytical lists—I'm not. In my student days, I didn't take the trouble to write down these groupings as I'm doing here. I was fascinated with what was happening as I mixed my paints, and I noticed certain key things as I went along. I realized that the charts were an orchestration of only six fundamental colors producing countless variations, and I became aware of an emerging order as I was working with them.

GOOD VIBES

Each chart that I completed gave me one of those electrifying "AH-HA!" experiences—as in AH-HA! . . . So that's what blue does! . . . That's how green works—and so on. The simple patterns somehow clicked in my mind. It wasn't an original discovery, it was just my turn.

Because of the charts, I know about the relationship between color and values—mainly that a color becomes *another color* in the attempt to lighten or darken it. I mentioned earlier that adding white to a pigment or mixture not only lightens it but changes its temperature by cooling it. This creates a *new* color. Using a color to lighten or darken another color does the same thing—it yields a *new* color. Yellow, for example, cannot simply be lightened or darkened and still remain the same yellow. It will be in the yellow family, but regardless of what I use to change its value, it will be less "yellow" than it was. The same goes for any other color.

From that fact, I made the inference that the same thing happens in the natural world. *Light does not lighten or darken without also changing color!* That was an astounding realization—a Law of Nature (Richard's Law?) and it explained the world of color to me so simply!

I realized that color was like silly putty—I couldn't move it around or even *look* at it without changing it. Why? Because moving it changed it relative to the colors it was moving within, and the light I used to see it with made it look the way it did. Doing the charts showed me quite dramatically how colors are transformed by surrounding colors—even how white, unmixed, takes on the blush of its neighbors.

In school and for a long time afterward, the charts were always at my side when I painted. I referred to them constantly as I tried to match the colors in my subject. It was wonderful to be able to glance at the model and instantly be able to identify the families of colors that I was seeing—and then know exactly what mixtures made those colors! The charts became as familiar to me as the scales I played on my piano—my well-worn secret friends.

Today I can look at a patch of grass in the sun, for example, and instead of thinking, "Gee whiz! Look at that lovely green!"—I automatically recognize it as probably Viridian with Cadmium Yellow Pale, plus White, about a # 4 value, with Viridian predominating. In the same way that I now see an edge as a specific type of brushstroke, I see a color as a specific combination of pigments. I recognize a family of color immediately, then which other color it leans toward, and how dark or light it is. I realize that this kind of thinking doesn't sound very thrilling or "arty," but it certainly leads to satisfyingly authentic color.



"PROMENADE" (Italy) Oil 20″ × 30″

Early morning and late afternoon or evening can (like this) be times of very clear color harmonies. The sun reaches us through more densely arrayed layers of atmosphere. Blues tend to be filtered out, and even a clear "blue" sky can be changed into violet or green and even deep red. If you wish to learn color harmony, go out and paint early or late in the day, but bear in mind that outdoor colors change faster at such times, so set up and get ready beforehand. There will be no time to waste on nonessentials once you get started.

COLOR HARMONY

The noun "harmony," as it refers to color, is another of those loosely-defined terms that can mean almost anything. To my late Aunt Maniac, a chair covered in chartreuse and electric purple went beautifully with her pink and silver drapes and orange rug. Most normal people, however, have a more restrained taste and regard harmony as a "pleasing" set of colors. They have an uncomplicated notion of what-goes-with-what based on fashionable notions of what is proper.

For example—Way, way, way back in time, when I was in high school, girls wore what were then called "matched" outfits—light pink dresses, dark pink shoes, pink hats, and so on. Automobiles were "two-toned," light blue on top, dark blue on the bottom. Rooms had blue-green wallpaper, yellow-green rugs, green patterned upholstered furniture, and so on. That was the fashion of the times, and merely reflected current ideas about what the contemporary fashion designers considered "appropriate," or their favorite term, "smart."

However, this is not the kind of color harmony I wish to examine here. For our purposes (in painting from life) we need a more useful grasp of what makes colors seem to belong together. We must understand how nature makes that happen—and why colors can sometimes look all wrong in a painting. *All* colors in a painting, however, cannot be wrong at the same time. Usually, there are only a few culprits, and I shall tell you why.

NATURE'S WAY

The most elementary definition of color harmony (in our everyday visual world) is this—Harmony is the thing that happens when the lights go on, whether it is the sun coming up or a light switch being flicked on. Well, what *does* happen? This happens—*ALWAYS*—whether it is the sun, the full moon, a table lamp, or even the dizzy neon lights of big cities—the source of light, or any combination of sources, produces a predominating effect that influences the color of everything in sight. *The color of the light acts as a common denominator to visually unite everything it illuminates.*

LIGHT, THEREFORE, PRODUCES HARMONY IN A SUBJECT. (And don't forget it!)

Local colors under the same light absorb and reflect wavelengths of light in direct proportion to the distribution of color radiating from the light source. Because of that, the colors of things in the visual field appear to mutually reinforce one another. *This constitutes an order—a relationship that unites colors—and that is what I refer to hereafter as harmony.* It is irrelevant to the fact of harmony whether or not the effect is pleasing to you. A harmonious color relationship, as I define it, is not necessarily one that you might enjoy. Enjoyment or dislike of colors is a purely emotional response that you and I have—a value judgment if you will. The "strip" in Las Vegas may give you the screaming meemies (or, God forbid, you may like it), but it is still a harmony of sorts—and harmony, pleasing or repulsive, is what makes things look *normal.* (If, under Las Vegas' neons, objects looked as if they were in soft romantic candlelight, you might think you were going batty.) As you paint, if you change the colors you see to make them more pleasing to yourself, that is your choice as an artist, but they will then not match the colors in the subject.



Working in a high-key is simple—just hold back all dark values in the subject, and paint the light values just as they are. Except for an accent in the model's eye, I decided not to paint darker anywhere than a #5 value. All others darker than that in the subject were raised to #5 in the painting. Working in a low-key is just the opposite—hold back on painting light values, and use the full range of darker values to develop the image. I find that low-key paintings are difficult to exhibit—they require near-perfect lighting (a rarity) to view them well, and they are more prone to show the dirt and grime and wear which hanging works are subjected to over time.

"HIGH KEY STUDY"
Oil 19″ × 19″

THE DYNAMICS OF HARMONY

If any light source on a subject changes significantly, or a new one is introduced, the overall harmony changes. Every source of light, natural or artificial, has a specific balance of colors. Some light is very blue, some is loaded with yellow, some may be more orange, and so on. Often, single light sources cause strikingly obvious harmonious effects. (A red sky at sunset, for example, or the orange glow of a fireplace, or moonlight.) Less "pleasing" harmonies (but harmonies nevertheless) occur under sodium vapor or mercury vapor street illumination. (They tend to be severely monochromatic and make you look sick.)

Harmony then is not "what goes with what?" It is more like "What color doesn't belong?"—*WHAT ISN'T POSSIBLE UNDER THIS LIGHT?* Certain colors simply *cannot* occur under given light conditions. The more limited a light spectrum is, the fewer colors there will be, and therefore, the stronger and more obvious the harmony will appear. For example, a light source that puts out only one color, such as the red safelight in a darkroom, will make everything look red. (Except red objects, which will appear white because they reflect nearly 100% of the light—no kidding, try it.)

PROVE IT TO YOURSELF

Make this simple test. Get some colored cellophane or colored glass (camera filters work nicely), and look at familiar scenes through it. If that is a problem, go to a drug store or supermarket and try on all the different sunglasses you can (especially the red, yellow, or blue ones)—then notice how the different tints of the sunglasses seem to transform the colors (and values) of things in the store. See how colors "come together" and seem to participate in a single common color. (Do not wear the glasses if you intend to buy groceries, especially meat.)

What is happening is this—in looking through the colored glass or cellophane you are effectively replicating what nature does with light—you are filtering out some frequencies of the spectrum and allowing others to come through. You might regard this little exercise as an exaggeration of how nature behaves, but it isn't. The range of color circumstances that nature can provide us with is infinitely more than we could ever hope to duplicate with manmade filters.

HARMONY IN A PAINTING

To create the illusion of nature's light-generated harmony in a painting, it is usually only necessary to recognize which color is *predominating* in the light on your subject, and then *RESTRAIN ITS COMPLEMENT.*[18] (Nature is doing that anyway.) By "restrain" a color I do *not* mean eliminate it; I mean subdue it by not showing it in its purest form. At first glance, this may sound like a formula, but in fact, it is simply a guideline based on the natural action of light. In warm light, for example, blues will probably contain at least some red or yellow, thus appearing less blue—how much less blue is entirely up to you. Your perception and judgment are also a part of the harmony, and there is no formula for that. However, knowing that certain colors will probably have to be moderated to achieve a harmony will help your decision making.

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18 Not to be confused with compl*i*ment, the expression of praise.

What is a complementary color? Well, it isn't a color that "goes with" another—like pink with red, or orange with yellow—a complementary color is the *opposite*, on the color wheel, of any given color. (See color wheel on the right.) Here are the complements of the primary and secondary colors:

Color	Complement
RED................	GREEN
YELLOW.......	VIOLET
BLUE.............	ORANGE
GREEN..........	RED
VIOLET.........	YELLOW
ORANGE.......	BLUE

Let us suppose, for example, that you are setting up to paint in your north light studio and the sky outside the window is a deep clear blue. This produces light that is very cool, definitely on the blue side. It means that all mixtures of orange (the complement of blue) will probably have to contain at least traces of blue (or green or violet) to produce the appropriate harmony. If you are working with light that is predominantly orange or yellow (such as in tungsten lamps), the blue family will be correspondingly less "blue." Such extremes of color saturation of the light are fairly easy to identify.

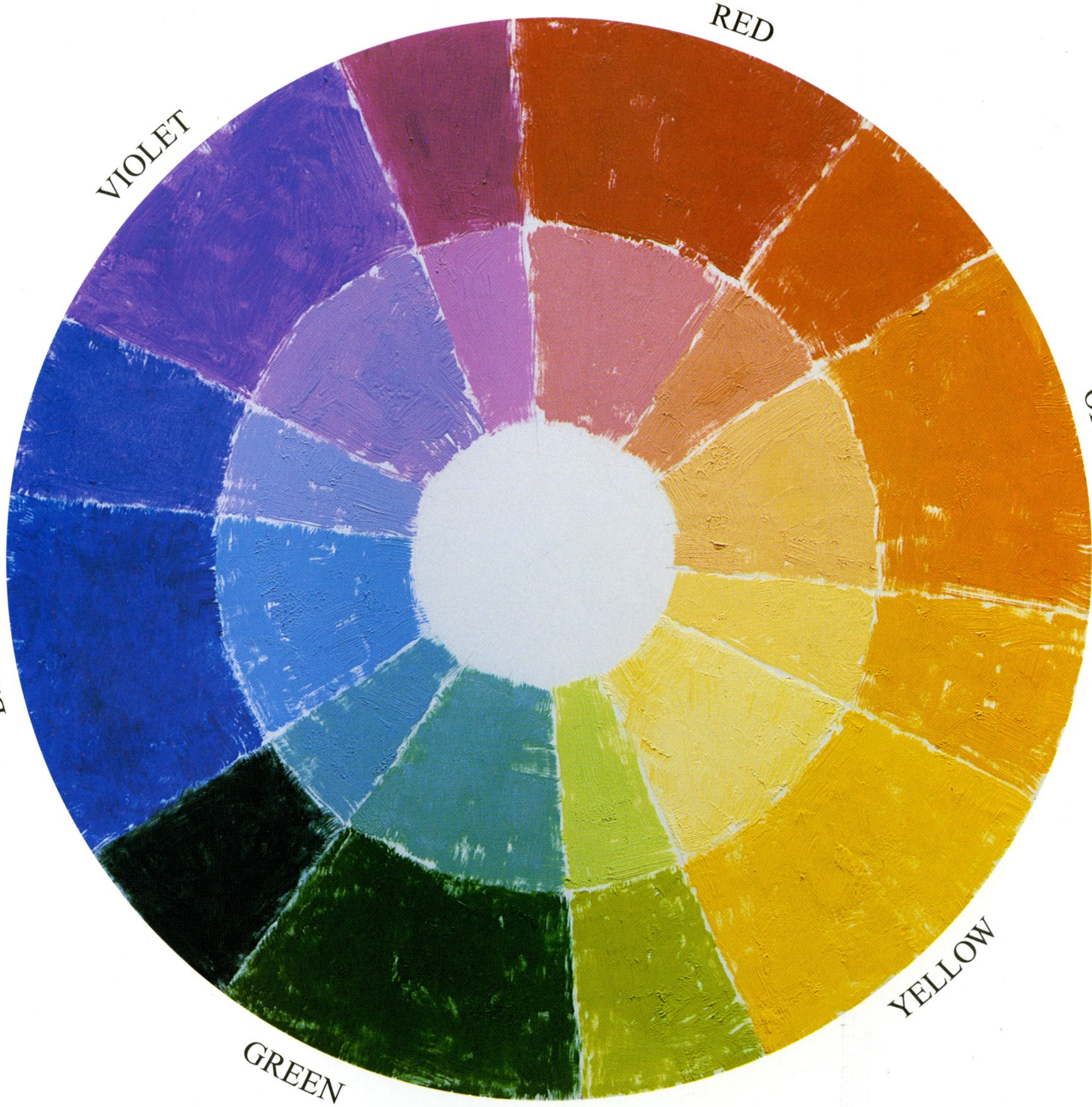
What if you can't identify the predominant color in the light?—Good question! Normally, we paint under conditions in which our light source provides us with a more even balance of color, like bright overcast light or 5500k fluorescent lamps. Under such average light conditions, the ambient harmony is not well-pronounced because the color of the light is not clearly weighted toward any single color. In these situations, you need only pinpoint the *temperature* of the light and then stay within it to achieve an effect that appears credible. (That means, for example, in north daylight keeping your shadows warmer than the light areas.)

Once you have determined the temperature of the light, be careful to scrupulously maintain not only the appropriate relationship (cool lights, warm shadows, for example), but also the *degree* of temperature difference between the light and shadow throughout the painting. (*How* warm the shadows are compared to the light areas.) This will give your color work a solidly authentic look. An arbitrary deviation from the temperature relationship will produce a weak and ambiguous effect.

MUD COLOR

When colors look "wrong" it is invariably because they are not the correct temperature for the harmony you are working in. "Muddy" color, for example, is simply a color that is inappropriate in temperature—as when you place a cool color in what should be a warm shadow on your painting. The only other cause of color looking "wrong" is that it may be incorrect in value (too light or too dark compared to what is on your subject). If this is so, make sure that the color you correct it with is consistent with the temperature that must be maintained—for example, if you are darkening a color in a shadow that is warm, don't use blue.

THE COLOR WHEEL



The color wheel is simply the visible part of the electromagnetic spectrum arranged in a circle. Colors that are opposite one another are described as complementary because when they exist as colored *light* and they are combined, they create white light. We painters are not so fortunate. When we mix complementary *pigments* together, we risk creating mud. The color wheel as such does not exist in nature. It is a purely human invention and of very little value to painters other than as a reference (as here). The only noteworthy thing to notice is that when you mix colors that are opposite one another, you always end up with the three primary colors mixed together.



In 1967, when I painted this, I was a lot younger and stronger. I attempted much larger canvases out of doors than I do now. One reason I got away with it was that I was far less demanding about my technique and the content of my work. It was a stage in which my technical aims were focused on Impressionism—on Sisley, Monet, and Pissarro's work. Dazzling broken-color was my goal, and *how* I put my paint on was not of great importance. This picture is typical of my thinking—bold brush strokes, minimal concern for edges, and very little regard for the precise texture or identity of things.

"GAYLORDSVILLE POND"
Oil 30″ × 24″

Any departure from the temperature structure that you have decided upon must be done for a good reason and with deliberate intent. You must know why and to what exact purpose you are stepping outside the bounds of the temperature system you are working with. When you *do* know what you are doing, you can reverse the temperature relationship with stunning effect—a trick the great illustrators used whenever they could get away with it.

N.C. Wyeth, for example, loved to put a hot yellow-orange light within a cool blue background—as when he painted a candlelit window at night. Frederic Remington did it nicely too when he gave us the fiery yellow discharge of a gunshot in cool moonlight. One of John Singer Sargent's favorite tricks was reversing temperatures in the highlights and shadows of the satin gowns that many of his sitters wore. The Dutch painters discovered this delightful color reversal 200 years before Sargent.

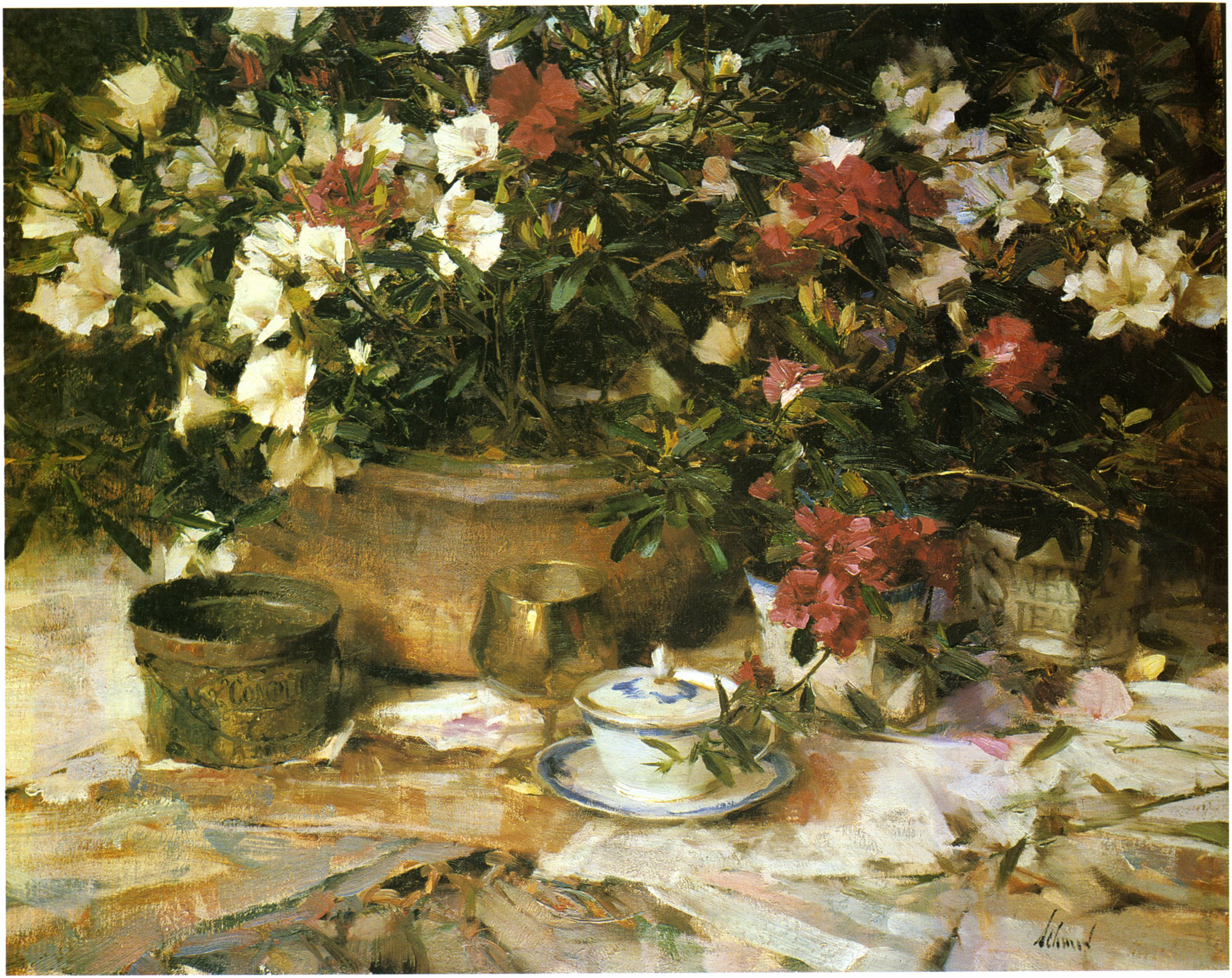
Such flourishes work (look convincing) because they actually do occur in the subject, but other liberties are possible even when they don't happen naturally. Remember though, that all of these manipulations look authentic only when the overall harmony in a picture is sound *and* the anomaly makes sense as a believable part of the subject.

HOW TO ***REALLY*** MESS UP HARMONY

Perhaps the oldest, most time-honored, seemingly most plausible (and wrong) method of creating a harmonious color relationship is the practice of premixing a single color into every other color on the palette before starting a painting. At first glance this idea seems to make sense—if the light is bluish, for example, then blue must be in every color on the subject, right? So if blue is premixed into every color to be used, a harmony—so the theory goes—will naturally and automatically result. Another variation on this system (still using blue as an example) is to mix blue into the pile of white to be used. The presumption here is that since white is used in so many mixtures in a typical painting, the blue (already mixed into the white) will somehow work its way onto the canvas in the course of mixing, and thus create a harmony. The reason these two systems fail is that a true harmony requires different amounts of the key color for each and every mixture in a painting, *and there is no way to predict that in advance.*

Still another (incredibly tedious) method involves mixing *all* the anticipated shades of color to be used in a painting before putting them on the canvas—an attempt to create a harmonious selection of colors on the palette even before a picture is started. A procedure like that not only requires a huge palette surface to contain the scheduled colors, but it also takes seemingly forever to mix them. It also fails for the same reason as above, and if that weren't enough, the first colors mixed often dry out, or the model leaves to find a better job before the whole set is finished and the painting started.

The problem with all of this well-meaning fuss is that it doesn't work, at least not in painting from life. Why? It doesn't work because replicating the harmony is not a simple matter of following a system. Harmony involves a complex interplay between the behavior of light and the mind of the perceiver (yours or mine). It is a dance, if you will, like the tango—without rules, yet a beautiful counterpoint nevertheless. It is an interaction in which the step-by-step judgment on the part of the painter is crucial. It is a process by which we must compare each separate color, *as we mix and apply it,* to all others that have gone before it. The process is a constant and meticulous decision making activity that must take place *one color at a time* throughout the entire course of a painting.



"AZALEAS" Oil 22″ × 28″

The harmonies that we need to produce in working from life do not arise from formulas such as the premixing methods that I have just described, or any others that I know of. Systems that promise this might produce *A* harmony, but not *THE* harmony that truly matches the way you see your subject. No system or device (even the marvelous computer I am using to write this) can anticipate all the colors in advance that will be needed in a painting. (The computer can't do it because it can't be programmed to see as you or I see.)

There are many other harmony schemes—reduction systems involving questionable mathematical relationships of colors on the color wheel or the spectrum, and various other quirky approaches embracing theories about the psychological or spiritual properties of color. There are even some harebrained notions about the mystical and occult nature of color. Believe me when I advise you to stay away from all of these things. You don't need to paint when the moon is full, or have incense burning in your studio while mumbling incantations, or follow some guaranteed formula to have a valid color harmony happen. Rely on what you *know* you can depend upon. Put your trust in the plain simple know-how that comes from studying what happens when you mix your colors together.

The masters' grasp of color harmony resulted from their understanding of the same few basic principles of color behavior that I have outlined in this discussion. These are sound observations about light and color because they are true and verifiable, and they can work for you. Think clearly and paint the colors you see as accurately as you possibly can. The result is bound to be harmonious.

THE OTHER MEANING OF HARMONY

So far, I have been dealing with harmony defined as an order arising from qualities in light, but "harmony" also describes color arrangements that *we* invent. We do this in our daily routines constantly, sometimes without even being aware that we are doing it. Whether it is picking out the right tie to wear or gathering objects and backgrounds for a still life, we are to some extent seeking a combination of colors that satisfies us. More often than not, we have something specific in mind, other times we try this and that randomly until something clicks, but as long as we have choices, we will always be selective (unless we flip a coin—and even *deciding* to do that is a deliberate choice).

We painters cannot afford a hit-or-miss method of selection because getting a particular color arrangement is crucial to the effectiveness of our work. When we are choosing and arranging things for a picture, we have almost unlimited creative latitude. (As opposed to painting what nature offers, as in landscape painting.) Therefore, I believe it is important for us to give ourselves as much freedom of choice as possible.

Freedom to me is access to fresh choices, and that means having the ability to disengage from external influences that *control* me. What are the inhibiting influences? Mainly they are the traditional, well-established ideas about what "good" color combinations are, particularly the wonderful color achievements of the masters. I'm not dismissing them, of course. Many of our artistic color preferences are deeply fixed in our minds precisely because we admire them so in the works of painters we wish to emulate. Studying the works of artists who are imaginative and skillful with color is a vital part of the learning process. Most of us go through this naturally, and it is a healthy thing. Eventually, however, a time comes when we must be imaginative and skillful in our own right.



"RANCH HAND"
Oil 20″ × 20″

I can't tell you exactly how to do that. No one can. It is bound up in the wonderful mystery of creativity itself. I can only advise two things. The first is to fall back on the old dictum "Know thyself." Cultivate an awareness of your unique preferences, and consider color from the standpoint of how *you* want it to function in the context of what you intend to convey in your art (rather than how other people will judge it against a norm).

Second, there does exist a splendid and limitless source of inspiration. If you are looking for a truly authentic-sure fire-never-fail example of creating harmony, look to nature! Study her fascinating color patterns and use them as references when you are setting up a subject. Keep your eyes open for the color combinations in leaves and rocks and little bugs, and so on. Keep notes or start a file on the things that catch your eye. Nature is a marvelous kaleidoscope of ever-new chromatic delights. It is all there for all to use and enjoy.

"PURE COLOR" PAINTING

Who among us has not gazed lovingly at the brilliant colors on a palette and wished to use them just as they came from their tubes—pure and unsullied—instead of degraded by mixing with themselves? Well, theoretically at least, any subject *can* be painted with pure unblended primary and secondary colors alone (plus white), without the deliberate use of any "grays" (tertiary colors—mixing red, yellow and blue together), and still look perfectly correct—not artificial or forced. *That*, after all, is how nature does it. Achieving this was the goal of some, but by no means all, of the French Impressionists.

To produce their striking color effects, many of them employed the now familiar technique of applying tiny bits of pigment laid side by side on the canvas as "broken color."[19] The idea was (and still is) to let the eye of the observer blend them to form new colors. (The painting must be viewed from a certain minimum distance for that to happen.) Monet, Manet, Sisley, Pissarro (and many others, including painters elsewhere in Europe, North America, and Australia) brought the broken color method to a high level of sophistication.

No one yet, however, has been entirely successful in attaining a completely "natural" result. By this I mean that impressionistic broken color paintings are (by definition) departures from the way most humans see the world. If you or I *actually* saw things entirely as discrete patches of exaggerated color, it would indicate some form of visual impairment. We do not normally see colors that way; we see them as already blended. We see green as green, not yellow and blue. (We must be trained to see it that way.) I do not suggest any criticism here of the Impressionists' efforts, but I do mean to point out certain limitations inherent in any "broken color" technique.

In practice, a successful representational painting done *strictly* in pure spectrum colors (plus white) is extremely demanding. In my experience it is by far the most difficult of all methods of painting because of the very high level of control that must be maintained. In the attempt, there are inevitable problems with the other visual elements that make things look "real" to us—particularly edges, values, and usually drawing.

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19 Many equate Impressionism with "broken color" painting originating in the 1800s. However, those techniques were already emerging as far back as Velasquez and Hals—two centuries before the French Impressionists were born.

THE COMPROMISE

In a pure broken color application, the opportunity for virtuoso brushwork is often unavoidably sacrificed. So too, subtle and accurate drawing is sometimes surrendered. In the need to be more colorful, and therefore lighter, the full range of values also suffers. (Impressionistic paintings often tend to be "high-key" renderings.) This value deficit is clearly seen in many broken color works when they are reproduced in black and white.

Even where there is no intention to bother with drawing, value, or edges (as in Monet's later works), the results are rarely, if ever, pure color paintings. Nearly all impressionistic painters eventually resort to grays to get their final effects, or grays appear in the blending that occurs (intentionally or otherwise) in the normal course of painting. Again, please do not take these comments as disapproval of Impressionism. Any serious effort toward brilliant color is worthwhile, and altering values or colors to produce special effects of light or mood is one of our most cherished techniques. It would be sad not to pursue color to its fullest.

The point is this—when I "push" my color and change values, I am then outside the bounds of the way things "ordinarily" appear. This means that I am in an area where the only reference (or criterion) I have is whether I *like* the way the painting looks. I can no longer compare it to the subject for correctness since I have deliberately departed from the natural appearance of the subject. In such a case I must be very careful because it is all too easy to lose control and spill over into flamboyantly impossible color and ineffective value relationships.

MY CHOICE

Simply making every color I put down as purely (unmixed) as possible does not automatically produce a splendid result. When all colors in a painting are equally pure and brilliant, the effect can often be less colorful than when one or two colors predominate. I have come to realize that nature, though she starts with pure color at the most elemental level, nevertheless reaches us as complex frequencies that are usually best represented as pigment *mixtures.*

My usual personal preference, and you may regard this as pure opinion not necessarily advice, is to try to use the complete range of pictorial elements if I can, unless there is a good reason (such as artistic choice) not to. I prefer a painting that is fascinating in all respects—drawing, edges, and values, as well as color. To achieve this, some compromise with color is usually necessary. For example, to get the deep values that I want, I must accept some sacrifice of brilliant color in the darks. I can't have both at the same time—dark color and vivid color together—*that* is an inherent limitation of paint. I find that very deep dark accents, however lacking in identifiable color (but which have a strong temperature), tend to magnify the richness of middle-tone colors, as well as the delicacy of high-keyed colors.

There is no question about the power of grays to enhance the more pure colors—that's why a single neon sign stands out when seen alone apart from other lights, and why it does not when *everything* is neon. In the end, of course, what matters is how well your color serves your artistic intentions.

Flowers offer endless opportunities for playing with paint. Their shapes allow for almost any conceivable method of application, and their colors often permit that most desired pleasure—using pigments straight from the tube. Flowers are like candy, everyone loves them, but like candy, a certain self-control must be observed. They are (to me) more than merely cute little blobs of color, or sure-fire sweet subject matter.

Flowers, are, after all, the sexual parts of plants, the alluring agents of the mystery of reproduction, the means of survival for them, and ultimately for us, and curiously, they are as beautiful to us as our own sexual attractions. (Though we don't know how flowers feel about our charms.)

To get the most from them, they must be carefully studied for their shapes, edges, temperature transitions, and values. Each separate flower or grouping of flowers has its own set of these elements. Extra care is needed in observing and rendering the temperature changes occurring within their petals. This is particularly true for complicated blossoms such as roses, where the multilayered structure and translucence of their petals can often reverse color temperatures—in other words, a flower in cool light, for example, may contain some cools in their shadows (instead of the expected warm tones), because of incidental light penetrating through petals rather than reflecting off of them. Overall, however, flowers conform to the usual principles of light temperature.



"PANSIES"
Oil 12″ × 8″

Lest I sound as if I'm throwing cold water on pure color painting, let me say that when it works it is glorious! Walking through an exhibition of virtuoso Impressionistic painting is like walking in sunshine. The attempt to keep color clean and strong is worth every effort. Even when a pure color painting falls short of its goal or sinks into improbable tonality, it is at least more fun to look at than a work safely rendered in dull browns and grays.

SOME NICE EXTRAS

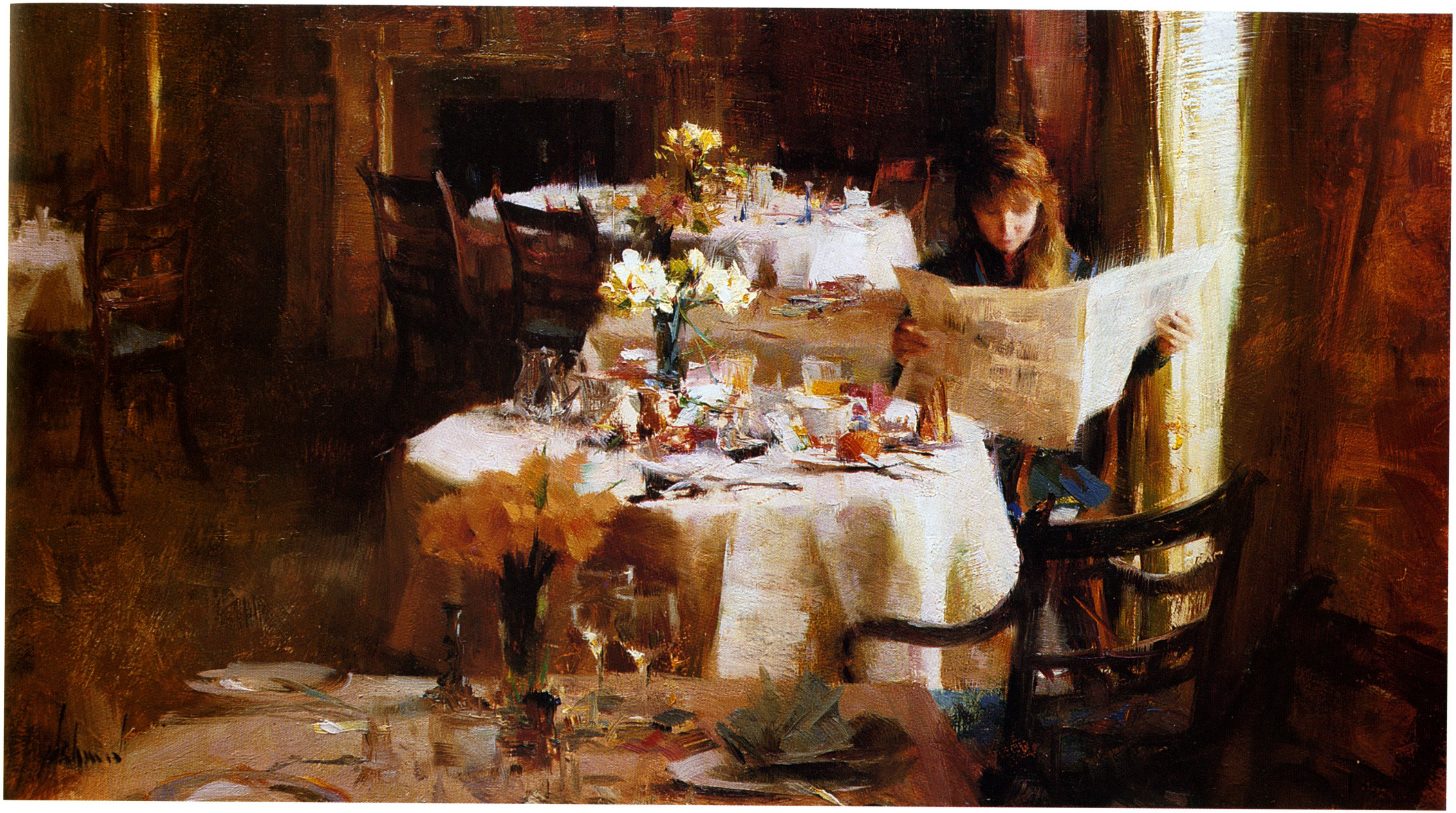
It is possible to enhance the appearance of paint mixtures by avoiding the habit of overmixing. Colors that are mixed too thoroughly lack the brilliance of more loosely blended paint. When tiny pigment particles are slightly separated, individual brushstrokes take on a scintillation similar to impressionistic broken color painting. That is why it is a good idea to clean your palette often and mix fresh piles of paint frequently. Rinse your brush well between *all* strokes, and try not to go over them except to modify their edges.

Mixing paint directly on the canvas instead of the palette is another way to achieve that casually mixed color effect. It isn't always possible, particularly where drawing is critical, but it can be done successfully in larger areas. In landscape painting, I often paint broad sections, such as the sky, with a single layer of white and then apply other mixtures into it right on the canvas.

Making use of the transparency of paint can also add immeasurably to the surface luster of a picture. I prefer to apply all of my darks very thinly when I can, particularly when those darks occur as shadow areas in the subject. Pigments used transparently have an optical quality quite different from their opaque state. When they are employed together—transparently in darks, heavily opaque in the light areas—the three-dimensional effect is magnified. Applying darks thinly also eliminates the annoying glare of brushmarks in areas that ought to remain quiet.

If you really wish to get fancy, and you are working *au premier coup* (wet-into-wet), try brushing transparent paint on top of opaque paint. There is only allowance for one *slow* swipe of the brush, which means no room for corrections, but the resulting color will be similar to the gleam of opal or mother-of-pearl. You might also try placing more than one color on your brush or palette knife, then make your stroke—carefully. These are both one-shot hit-or-miss artifices and the odds are not good that you will succeed on the first attempt, but they are definitely impressive when they work. One caution however, do not get too involved in such flourishes until you first master the basics of simply matching colors. Tricks are fun but they are not a substitute for professional skill.

This doesn't come under the heading of fancy tricks, but one of the best pieces of advice I can give is to keep your palette clean and orderly. When I see students struggling with badly colored paintings, invariably their palettes and brushes are just as messy. Lay your colors out in a sensible order, and with generous amounts of paint. Have a *large* container of solvent near so you can keep your brushes clean as you work. Whatever technical stumbling blocks you might have with color, don't make things more difficult by not having something as easy to acquire as good working habits.



"HOBB GREEN BREAKFAST" (Yorkshire) Oil 10″ × 18″

Nancy is shown here in 1994 at the Hobb Green, a Manor house and estate located in Yorkshire, England (now a Bed and Breakfast). As gracious as our hosts were, I could not bring myself to ask permission to actually paint in their dining room, so this was done from a photograph. Fortunately, I had painted her and others often from life in similar settings, which made it fairly easy to extrapolate colors missing in the photo—mostly those in the very dark and bright areas—color film fails in very high contrast situations. It also helped knowing that the light was cool (it was a bright overcast morning); as long as I kept my darks progressively warmer than the light areas, I was safe (since the window was the sole light source).

SUMMING UP

1. Color is one of our more powerful tools, but its richly complex and relativistic nature makes it difficult to understand and use.

2. The colors of things look the way they do because of the light on them, the influence of surrounding colors, and their pigmentation.

3. A color changes its appearance when either the light changes or its adjacent colors change.

4. The limitations of paint prevent us from duplicating the actual brilliance in nature.

5. Factors such as our emotional responses to color, our preconceived notions, and misinformation about it interfere with our objective perception of color.

6. In spite of its complexity, color can be understood rationally and used effectively. Three things are necessary to do this—first, identify the color you are seeing; second, mix it correctly (so it matches what you have seen); and third, put it in the right place on your painting.

7. The color we use to paint with acts by reflecting light. Therefore, we cannot match the brightness of certain things in nature (particularly light sources). To compensate for this we can only paint the relative brightness of light sources compared to other things in the visual field. This usually requires rendering a light source in the subject as the lightest light in a picture.

8. White paint is technically the coolest pigment; therefore, when we add white to any mixture, the resulting color is cooler.

9. Understanding the phenomenon of color temperature is the key to controlling color. All colors manifest a changeable property called temperature—colors in a painting appear either warmer or cooler (or hotter or colder) than their adjacent colors. The apparent temperature of any pigment color or pigment mixture changes when lightened or darkened, when any other pigment is introduced into the color or color mixture, or when surrounding colors on a painting are altered. The apparent temperature of any color in a subject likewise shifts when the light on it changes or when bordering colors change (as when you alter the background in your subject, or the clouds shift in the landscape).

10. When you work, try to have the same light on your subject, your palette, and your painting.



"ROSIE SKETCHING" Oil 12″ × 18″

Since Rosemary Frantzen is probably destined to be regarded as one of the incomparable painters of our time, this little sketch will have a modest historical value, because it shows her (in 1987) attempting her very first landscape painting. I did not realize then how far her journey into the world of color and light would bring her.

11. The temperature (or color) of the ambient light is the single most powerful factor in causing the colors on a subject to look the way they do. You can determine the temperature by comparing the light on a subject to its shadows. Warm light produces cool shadows, and cool light yields warm shadows.

12. I recommend doing a series of color charts (as previously described) to understand the capabilities and qualities of your pigments. Doing the charts will also teach you to identify colors in your subject and accurately mix the color you see with the least amount of trial and error. It is also a good idea to make a color chart whenever you introduce a new pigment on your palette.

13. Keep your palette simple—the fewest colors necessary for the way you paint—the selection I use is a good example. I also recommend that you keep your palette orderly. Lay the colors out in a logical sequence and in sufficient quantity. Don't be "stingy" with your paint, and try to keep the piles clean (dip into them with a clean brush or knife). Remember Richard's Law of Creeping Color—*What is on your palette will probably end up on your canvas.* See that you clean your mixing surface frequently to avoid dirty mixtures. Have plenty of rags or highly absorbent paper towels on hand and use them lavishly.

14. Color harmony (as it should concern painters) is not simply a pleasing selection of colors. In painting from life, theoretical systems of color mixing or predetermined color schemes cannot produce an authentic version of the harmony in a subject. Why? Because you cannot predict all the colors that will be needed in a painting. No system can take into account the factor of *you* as the perceiver of your subject.

15. The main source of color harmony is the light on a subject. Light produces the colors (wavelengths) of whatever it falls upon.

16. The light on your subject rarely has equal amounts of colors in its spectrum—which means your light will be weighted toward blue, or orange, or some other color. *That*, in turn, means some other color or colors in the spectrum are going to be either absent or diminished. If the light is strongly blue, for example, it follows that red and yellow in their purest form will be proportionally minimized. These absent or diminished colors need only be restrained in your color mixtures to duplicate the harmony in the subject. (This, by the way, is not a scheme or system. It is merely a description of how light works and how to cooperate with it.)

17. Light of a single strong color presents a relatively easy problem in achieving a harmony. Having the same success with more evenly-balanced light takes more care and considerable experience, but the principle is the same.

18. "Pure color" painting requires the highest degree of control because it involves changing (usually exaggerating) the colors that are seen. Greens, for example, are often broken into their constituent yellows and blues, violets into bits of blue and red, and so on. Values as well are changed, typically a lightening of the darks to make their color more brilliant. The risk in all of this is that the process can so easily slip over into gaudy superficiality. It's worth the risk, however, and if it doesn't work, you can always start over.

19. Stay away from crackpot, short-cut-sure-fire schemes to obtain "good" color. Stick to the wise old-fashioned method of understanding your paints and developing a sharp eye for color. Learn from the masters—it's all there in their paintings—then do your own dance.

BON APPÉTIT!

So ends our discussion about this thing called color—this magnificent, vexing, breathtaking gift to our senses. Give it your patience, your devotion, and never stop trying to make it shine in your paintings. Treat it as your secret loved one, and it will shower your efforts with more beauty than you can imagine.



"RANCH HOUSE"
Oil 12″ × 24″

CHAPTER EIGHT—COMPOSITION

The instant you make a mark on a surface such as a canvas or piece of paper, you create a "composition." If you place your mark at dead center, the effect is symmetrical. If you put it anywhere else, it is not, and we call that asymmetrical. If you do it with calculated thought, it is called designing. It's boring stuff when put like that, but upon this simple reality rests the vast body of theory and canons of composition. Except for Abstraction, nothing in painting is more controversial or difficult to define than composition. We all think we recognize a "good" one when we see it ourselves (or create one), but we don't always agree with others about their choices, or even what constitutes a good composition. One that gives you thrilling goosebumps might bore me, and vice versa. To make matters worse, we are given theories and rules about it (many of them contradictory) and then told to forget the rules and "do our own thing."

In this discussion I deal with composition (also called design) not in a general way, but only as it applies to painting from life. Remember this as you read because there is a *big* difference. Design in a pure sense starts with nothing and creates something, whereas in painting from life, our creativity usually begins with things that already exist. We choose sections of the visible world, or we arrange elements from it to make our pictures.

In working from life, our creativity lies in the fact that we are (I trust) highly selective in our choices. Unlike the person who takes snapshots simply to record something, we painters scan what is before us for its design possibilities. We look for a view that will employ all the elements in a scene to enhance the thing we are interested in depicting. If we are arranging things to paint (as in setting up a still life or model), we select our subject matter and viewpoint in that same way. Sometimes it is easy, sometimes not. Often a subject bears a design so obvious and compelling that we can't go wrong. Other times we agonize over how to paint something interestingly.

WHY COMPOSITION DRIVES US NUTS

You wouldn't think that the simple act of arranging shapes in a picture could be in any way confusing, but it is. We have all felt that strain at one time or another. Often, instead of just doing what pleases us, we get sidetracked. We tend to be particularly hard on ourselves by scrutinizing our painting for "correct" composition. We worry about whether it "balances," or if it has "unity," or "movement." We ponder such notions as negative space, aesthetic centers, lines of direction, dynamic spatial relationships, connecting patterns, dominant shapes, focal points, rhythm, emphasis, convergence, divergence, and on and on.

You will note that such words and phrases represent abstract ideas, whereas an actual composition is made up of tangible pigment on a physical surface. Abstractions (as I am fond of pointing out) are tricky to define, and it would be better to be more specific when we get down to the business of translating something like "balance" into real paint. Unfortunately, however, the words we commonly use in talking about composition are so unclear that they could mean almost anything.

The 17th century saw a mounting demand for portraiture among the affluent of Europe, especially the Dutch, but generally anyone with money to spend. Painters such as Frans Hals, Sir AnthonyVandyke and Rembrandt, were happy to oblige. Though many kinds of compositions were used, a particular style emerged, one that we tend to associate with the Dutch Masters, even though its origins go back further, at least as far as Titian.

Perhaps the fashion of the times—dark coats, white lace collars—imposed this design (how could it not?). At any rate, it became a classic standard, and is still used today. It endures because it is very simple and powerfully effective—a single focal point within a field of dark—a viewer's attention cannot stray from it. The plain white against the flesh tones and darks is so compelling that secondary focal points, such as the hands, do not seriously compete for attention.

You can see this composition over and over in the works of Sargent, most of his contemporaries, and probably everyone since the 17th century who has ever done portraits. It probably will never go out of style, and it shouldn't, because it is such a good idea. That is why it became, and remains to this day, one of our best compositional tools.

If you are worried about originality in your designs, remember this—***keep your priorities straight; being original in self-expression is not as important as* what *you are trying to express.*** Simply being clever is an ego-trip; having something valuable to say is what really counts. In this painting, I want you to see what I saw in this little girl's face, not what a shrewd designer I am.



"ROBIN"
Oil 20″ × 16″

"Balance" could require sticking everything together in the middle of a painting, scattering things about more or less evenly, or all squeezed together into one corner. The same could be said of "unity." As for "movement," as far as I know, once you put the paint on, it just stays there very still. Other notions—the relationship of masses, positive and negative space, rhythm, pattern theories—they too are extraordinarily difficult to pin down.

There are plenty of dos and don'ts as well—*don't* cut your picture in half, *do* have three or five things instead of two, *don't* have everything equal, *do* overlap shapes, *don't* have lines leading out of a picture. All are familiar rules, yet all have been deliberately ignored by imaginative painters without compromising their designs. The truth is that we are delighted when the rules are violated in ingenious ways. We love it when someone does something outrageous, and it turns out to be the most simple and direct solution (in the same way that we are thrilled by a perfect crime when no one gets hurt and the insurance company pays dearly).

Some believe that mathematical relationships underlie good design. They choose the placement of focal points, even the proportions of their canvases, according to ratios such as those in Euclid's *Golden Mean* or other related formats. Another optimistic system called *Dynamic Symmetry*, based on the geometric distributions on life forms such as plant leaves and sea shells, was also popular for a time, and is even having a revival of sorts. Commercial artists have a scheme for finding "aesthetic centers" by segmenting their picture with five horizontal and five vertical lines, then choosing a point where any second or third line intersects. Then there is the blindfold approach—drawing random lines, trusting in chaos theory to produce something. All such systems are a substitute for thinking, and in any case cannot be applied rationally to painting from life.

In the end, most of us concede that our instinct (for want of a better word) takes over as a final determination. We describe a good composition as simply one that "works," or "feels right," or it does what we want it to. Beyond that it is hard to be more specific—but read on Dear Friend, this gets *very* interesting.

CLEARING UP THE CONFUSION

I don't mean to be critical of the teachings or language of composition, and I certainly don't wish to suggest that they are not useful. After all *something* about certain arrangements touches us—so much so that we study them intently to see how they were done. For centuries great paintings have been analyzed for their structures and patterns—we cannot rest with the idea that great artists simply have a knack for putting things together. We want to know what the "knack" is, if they have perhaps tapped into some fundamental law of design, or if they have some insight in which we might share.

There is no question in my mind that they had insights, but believe me, there is no fundamental law or natural formula for good composition. What we are really seeing when we are attracted to a striking design is simply the artist's *solution* to her or his particular problem of arrangement. We are looking at the result of their thought processes rather than the operation of an elemental law. I believe that certain artists are able to do that because they have a very clear and strong understanding of what they wish to paint and how they want to express it. It is when ideas are fuzzy that self-expression becomes so difficult. (Ask any writer.) Knowing *what* you wish to say comes first, the design then follows effortlessly.

I wasn't consciously thinking about Vermeer when I was setting up Nancy in this pose, but there it is! The similarities are undeniable—the plain wall, the fabrics, the strong side light from a window (although Vermeer's light, with one or two exceptions, always came from a higher angle and the opposite direction). For all of its obviously similar design elements, however, there are striking dissimilarities in my painting.

For example, Vermeer would never have cut his picture in half as I did here, the bottom half dark, the top half, light. Nor would he have employed my loose edges, impasto painting, or palette knife work.

Still, his influence came through, the result of how (almost automatically) I understand and absorb the things I like in works of other painters. I take what I value in them (rejecting the rest) and make them part of my own repertoire. I do this constantly; my mind is a veritable supermarket of other artists techniques and ideas. My head is filled with Rembrandt faces, Sargent brushstrokes, Zorn edges, Sorolla's color, Mancini's romanticism, Serov's haunting honesty, and so much more. If I never had a single original thought in my own head, I could still come up with mere composites of their works and make them look uniquely my own. It doesn't happen that way, of course, because I have an irresistible drive to put my own spin on things. For better or worse, I always see things in the Masters' works that I am compelled to do differently.



"NANCY"
Oil 20″ × 16″

The more interesting design solutions tend to endure because the people who thought of them were very innovative. (The same is true of technique.) When those solutions were linked to other cultural basics of their time—tradition, religion, philosophy, economics, or mathematics—they merged to form whole periods or schools of composition such as Classical Greek, or Renaissance, or Baroque, or Tang dynasty. Today these influences and others are still strongly reflected in contemporary design; however, the playing field is now so extensive and aggressively experimental that no single trend is dominant.

MY SOLUTIONS

For me, the design of my painting is not an end in itself. I think of it as just another tool to voice my ideas. The purpose of my house, to give you an analogy, is to have a comfortable place to live in and one that charms me, rather than something to impress the neighbors. My attitude toward design is similar. All I care about is whether it serves to depict the thing I am painting and then pleases me when I see it finished. I don't worry about following or breaking any of the guidelines, or even if my design is particularly clever or sophisticated or original. To me, composing is simply a matter of having a definite picture of what I want to see on my canvas—and then doing it.

My hope is to capture a viewer's attention, then direct it to the important areas of the painting and keep it there. Any design which facilitates that happening is "good" composition in my view. It is simply whatever does the job—whatever viewpoint or arrangement that I think will convey my idea best.

I have a few "rules" for myself (which I interpret rather liberally). One of them is about *subtlety*. Whenever my composition is too obvious or overpowering, it interferes with my purpose. I want you to see my picture first, not my design. I believe that, like any other element in a painting, composition should remain a functional part of the whole. (Unless the design itself is the point of the subject.) Along with this I believe that *simplicity* is a good idea. I would rather not risk confusing my audience with conflicting points of interest or unnecessary ostentation. (A little is nice, though.) I like a certain *naturalness* too—showing things the way a normal human being sees the world, rather than viewpoints only a mouse, or a soaring bird, or a fish would experience. I think it would detract from the credibility of my picture to expect my viewer to believe that I was suspended in mid-air while painting. Finally, I prefer to keep things just a bit off-balance. I don't want to bore anyone either.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

In working from life with something that is already arranged, such as a landscape, all I have to do is make *choices*. Once I settle on what I wish to paint, it is up to me—and me alone—to pick out which specific section of the landscape to do. It is then my task to select a vantage point that satisfies me, to judge how large or small I wish to represent it, and to decide where I want to place it within my canvas. When I am arranging a subject to paint (setting up a still life or a model, for example) I have more options—and therefore more decisions to make as well. Since I can arrange things in any way I wish, I must have a plan. If I don't have one, I won't know where to start, what to shoot for, or even when I'm finished. Bad choices are things I don't wish to see on my canvas, so I don't choose them.

How do I make my choices? The same way I choose from a box of chocolates—according to what appeals to me. I usually know *what* I want to paint, or at least what I'm looking for, so that part is not a problem. (I never just have an urge to paint.) I clarify my idea—see it in my mind as a painting—by going through my version of that mental checklist I described in the chapter on starting. I ask myself *why* I want to paint the thing I have in mind, and *what* it is about the subject that intrigues me. The *how* then becomes obvious once I understand the *what* and *why*. When I do it that way—as opposed to searching through a set of rules and theories—it isn't hard, it's fun! It's like creating my own banana split with all the maraschino cherries and chocolate syrup my little heart desires, and I'm the one who gets to eat it! It is total freedom because I can do anything. So can you.

GOOD THINGS TO KNOW—BUT BE *CAREFUL*

So, are there no rules? Is there nothing more than your sixth sense to guide you? Are there no merits in the traditional principles we are taught about composition? Of course there are! The very things I mentioned above—the abstract notions that I said were so difficult to pin down—all those ideas are invaluable tools when they are understood in more specific terms. Just bear in mind that they are only suggestions, not instructions. They are useful ideas, but they are not in any way absolute requirements. Moreover, most compositions rarely involve all the elements of design. For example, many paintings do not contain large simple masses, strong lines, or even a noticeable pattern, yet they satisfy us. The following are the more familiar compositional basics, with my version of what they are, or are not.

BALANCE is probably the most constant preoccupation when it comes to design. When painters are unhappy with a composition the first thing they say is that it doesn't *work*. When asked what that means, they say it doesn't *balance*. When pushed to explain further, they point out that everything is too much over here or over there, or grouped at the bottom or top, or just scattered about in a way that leaves them uneasy. The problem almost solves itself when they can finally be that specific. (Just move things.)

If I can describe *why* a picture looks out of balance to me—exactly which thing bothers me—I am at the same time providing myself with the solution to correct it. If I am unhappy with things shoved to one side, I can just move them to the center, or the other side, or wherever I please. That's all there is to it. The Design Police will not come crashing through my studio door and arrest me for violating the rules of balanced composition.

There are no "right" places to put things except where they look best to me. If I don't like the way nature is arranged I can find a better viewpoint. In any case there is no commandment that I *must* have balance in a painting. The whole idea of balance stems from tradition anyway[1] and amounts to little more than a consensus of what is acceptable or desirable.

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1 There is a belief that a sense of visual balance in art stems from our natural physical need for equilibrium, but there is no real evidence for that. Art is a human invention (along with all the forms and conventions that go with it). Looking at art and responding to it is a learned human phenomenon. If there were anything natural about it, cats would pounce at pictures of mice, but they don't, at least not mine. (Possibly I can't paint mice convincingly.)



"NANCY'S VELVET CAPE" Oil 24″ × 40″

Breaking the old rules of composition is always satisfying—in this case, placing Nancy's head (the focal point) way over to one side. I think it looks just fine over there—splended, in fact. Placing it as I did allowed me to include the hands and book, and the result is what I intended. That little phrase—*what I (or you) intend*—shoud be, in my opinion, the sole determining factor in choosing or creating a design. The originality of it, the lack of originality, or its adherence to accepted principles, is completely irrelevant to its function. Composition should be simply an arrangement that satisfies us. No one outside of ourselves has a legitimate right to pass judgment on the way we depict our subjects.

We are not endowed with an inborn sense of what is aesthetically effective about balance or anything else. If such a capacity were included in our DNA or breathed into our souls by God, Art would be boring stuff indeed. Not only that, it would probably all look the same in every culture and generation. We learn by being taught, but also through discovery and experimentation. I like breaking the rules. For me, the idea of incongruity is seductive because when I use it with a deliberate purpose in mind, the tension can be very effective—it is the same twist that makes a good joke funny.

HARMONY in design is more difficult to pin down. It is *not* some ideal relationship among the elements in a painting. There is no such thing. There are no valid absolutes underlying design as such, only passing taste. *Disharmony* is easier to explain. As with color, it is the presence of something that doesn't belong, and that is easy to identify because it invariably involves an error in drawing, values, edges or color. If your subject looks harmonious to you but your painting doesn't, then you probably made technical mistakes. To find your errors, use the process of elimination I described in Chapter One (Free Advice). It works.

If you have arranged a subject, such as a still life, and it doesn't look harmonious to you, it means that you didn't have a clear idea of what you wanted to do. If you did, you would have had no problem putting things exactly where you wanted them, and you would be happy.

LINES OF DIRECTION are the conspicuous edges of shapes (or actual lines) in a painting that presumably "lead" an observer's eye somewhere. Some subjects have them, but others don't. It's helpful when they seem to travel to your center of interest. If they lead out of your picture or in some way seem awkward to you, they can often be softened or even eliminated without being noticeably unfaithful to the subject. If you can't do that, find another spot from which to paint. Some subjects have no strong lines at all, and that's fine. Lines are not the only tools we have.

Be wary of the many curious notions about lines, particularly the belief that certain lines in themselves have suggestive personalities. There are supposed to be happy lines, sad lines, sexy lines (naturally), spiritual lines, lines that shouldn't touch, symbolic lines, and so on. Ideas like that are pure imagination. Lines are simply lines. If you come across such nonsense, ignore it. Perspective lines, however, are vital. Get them right.

MOVEMENT and RHYTHM are also assumptions about controlling the attention of an observer's eye, except that shapes are involved instead of lines. Movement can probably best be described as the use of more or less connected shapes to nudge a viewer's interest around within a painting—stopping at the main dish, of course—then going around again. Rhythm is the *repetition* of certain similar shapes intended to make things more pleasant along the way—having all your ducks in a row, so to speak. This is not a bad idea if the shapes are clearly present that way in the subject. If they aren't, and you move the shapes indiscriminately, your painting will not look exactly as the subject does, but that is your choice.



"MARACAIBO WASHDAY" (Venezuela) Oil 12″ × 20″

This is an example of using converging lines to lead an observer's eye to a focal point. I confess to taking a few liberties with the clotheslines—raising and lowering them here and there—to make them arrive just where the girl is standing, but that is my prerogative, isn't it? It is yours too. Do whatever is necessary to tell your story. You are in charge. However, don't change things simply because they are hard to paint (unless they are clearly impossible); that amounts to your subject being in charge.

Ideas about Movement and Rhythm are perhaps more useful in setting up a model or still life. You have real control in those situations. Elements to be painted can be arranged with a definite plan. Still there is never a guarantee that a person seeing your painting will look at it the way you want them to—a greedy buyer, for example, may see only your signature. With a nude figure painting, you *know* where eyes will go no matter what else is in the picture.

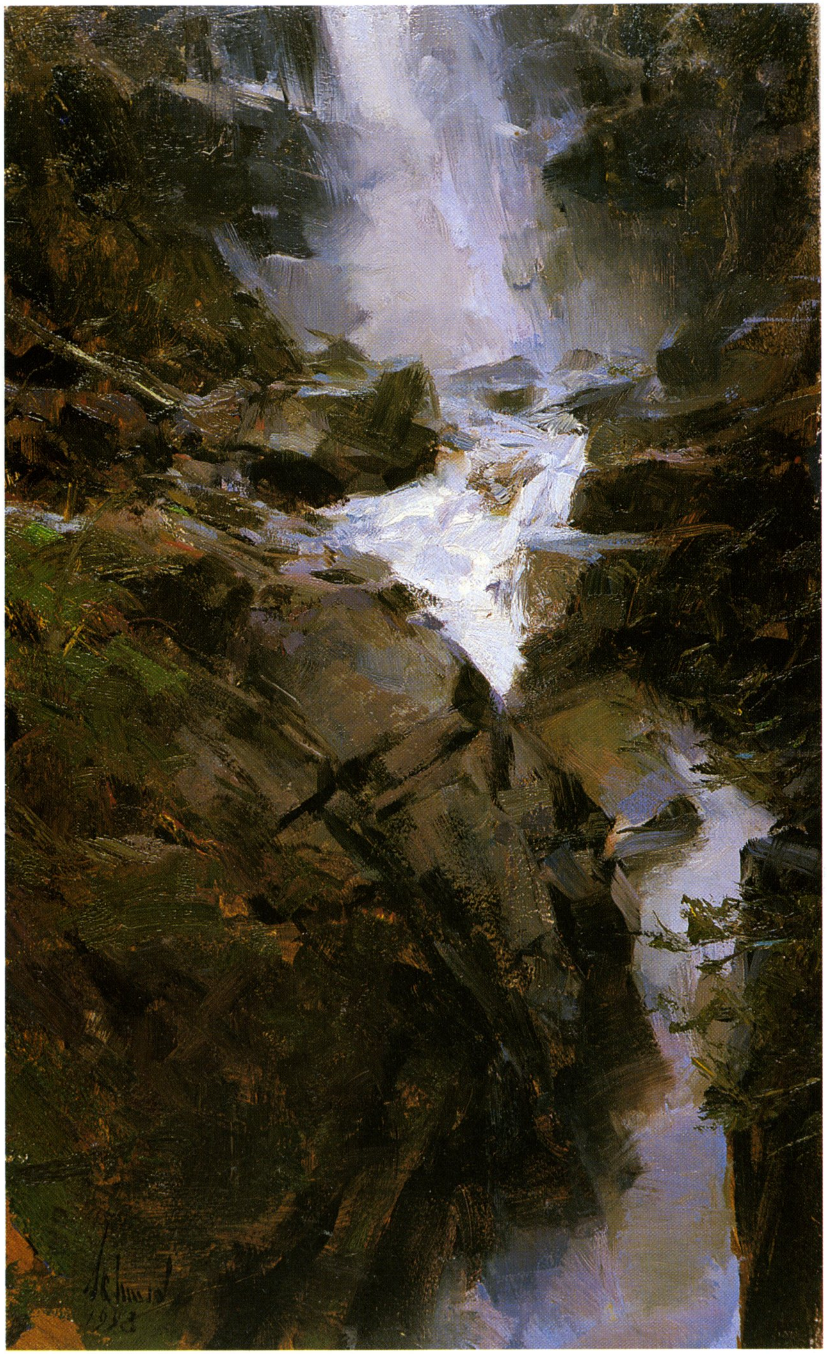
VALUES, the fewer the better—especially unbroken, well-defined ones—are considered to be essential to good compositions. Unquestionably, simple contrasting values yield strong statements, just as a loud yell gets more attention than a lot of little twitters. Subtlety, however, is often stronger. A whispered word under the right circumstances can be louder than shouting. Strong simple values are wonderful when they are obviously a quality of a subject; however, if those values are not there, don't try to invent them. When your values match those in your subject, your painting will have all the authority it needs.

FOCAL POINTS are centers of interest—places you want your viewer to pay attention to—the vital spot where lines of direction and movement are supposed to lead. A center of interest makes good sense. The mind wanders when there is nothing to focus on. That's why politicians, art critics, and comedians are so boring (and why we often can't tell one from another). Having one dominant focal point certainly seems to be the best way to avoid confusing a viewer. Rembrandt, as we know, was very good at this, and his placement of a single illuminated face against a dark background is a classic standard.

When there are many elements in a composition, a choice must be made about which one should prevail. That, of course, is up to you. If the thing you want to be your center of interest is already outstanding in your subject, just paint what you see. If other elements compete for attention, simply emphasize the one you want, or subdue the others, or do both. It is easy to create a single powerful center of interest—just concentrate the brightest colors, sharpest edges, the most interesting drawing, and most contrasting values all in one spot!

Don't worry about where on a canvas to put your center of interest. There is no "right" place to put a center of interest other than where it looks best to you—where you hope your viewer will look. The idea that there is an ideal aesthetic center on your canvas is as silly as the right place for a cloud in the sky.

PATTERN is a very good thing to know about. Typically, it is a large conspicuous shape (or more often a grouping of shapes) within a painting to form a single abstract value design. This happens when light values are connected together en masse against a darker background, or the *reverse.* For example, the shape of a model's white dress may connect with the light-colored shape of a background to form a single larger shape. Patterns serve nicely as a sort of master plan when a subject already has broad simple values joined, or when you wish to set up a subject so that you have such a pattern to paint. We are all familiar with these motifs in the other arts—the major theme that spins off into variations in music, or the story line in a novel—they provide a single unifying structure in which to expand ideas.



Pattern, the design resource I use here is the most effective method I know of to achieve overall "unity" in a painting. This is a very simple pattern—a single light value traversing two dark shapes. Other clear examples of pattern can be seen on pages 19, 20, 32, 34, 37, 42, 46, 66, 69, 73, 77, 82, 90, 99, 104,110, 113, 117, 138, 142, 150, 155, 157, 163, 166, 173, 174, 188, and 193.

Pattern as a deliberate compositional motif came into broad use with the rise of *Chiaroscuro* (high contrast light and shadow) in the 17th century. It infected nearly all schools of Western European painting, but its best examples can be seen in Dutch, Flemish, and Spanish art. Rubens used it splendidly in his *Descent from the Cross;* Velasquez, Rembrandt, Hals, and others embraced it. Pattern became the abstract structure that unified complicated paintings; it served as the basis for arranging subject matter and disparate pictoral elements into and within a few main value shapes, rather than allowing things to be scattered about haphazardly.

Pattern gives a painter a plan, a grand design to follow. Often, as here, nature provides a ready-made pattern. Other times we must search for vantage points or manipulate our subjects (as in setting up a model or still life) to achieve a pattern. The most salient feature of a pattern is that, in a painting, either all of the major light shapes are connected, or all the dark shapes—in the case of certain vignettes, it can be both.

"GLACIER WATERFALL" (Alaska)
Oil 20″ × 12″

Patterns are easy to spot both in nature and in art. Here in the Colorado mountains, nature's patterns abound in our massive rock structures and sweeping cloud formations. In a painting, however, a pattern is simply a flat (two-dimensional) value shape that can be any combination of any visible elements. Objects, the lighting, background values—all can combine (when they are connected) to form a single value pattern. Painters such as Rembrandt, Lautrec, Maliavin, Frank Brangwyn (notably), and many of the American illustrators used strong patterns as the basis of their compositions.

SO WHAT SHOULD *YOU* DO?

How do you make judgments about your own designs? My advice is first to learn all you can about what has already been done. There are many books available that present design theory with helpful graphics and in more detail than this book. Some books are worthwhile, but others, because they are rigidly dogmatic, or written in vague terms, should not be taken seriously. Make sure that the ideas and explanations in them are written in plain everyday English instead of arty gobbledygook such as this: "Unity is harmony in balance with objective rhythmic dynamics." That kind of drivel is simply ostentation concealing ignorance, and it leads nowhere.

Be sensible. Don't take anything seriously that isn't specific and clearly stated. If it is specific, don't accept it unless it is well-grounded and you agree with it. If you are a student, ask your teacher explain things in down-to-earth terms. If that doesn't work, offer your brush and ask for a demonstration. In the event a teacher is unable or unwilling to do either, then find yourself another teacher. When you do connect with a wise teacher, use the words *why* and *how* a lot. Good teachers like that, and you get good answers.

Always be on the prowl for paintings with designs that thrill you. Try to figure out why you like them. If you know what it is about a design that turns you on—what the artist captured that you would like to capture too—then that something becomes part of your repertoire too! It is relatively easy to see how a design is produced once you become aware of exactly what the artist achieved.

You have heard this before, but it is true—Look to the compositions in nature! She is an infinite source of design. Like a perfect lover, she never disappoints, never grows ugly, and never fails to reveal herself in fascinating new ways. Just be faithful to her.

CHAPTER NINE—TECHNIQUE

Technique, as distinct from *Techniques,*[1] is about how you physically put paint on your picture. It is often linked with the word *Style,*[2] which is a more general term. Ideally, your technique ought to be a natural extension of your personal style, just as your signature is, or your smile.

Most of us have what we consider to be an awkward technique when we first begin painting. As children, we need time and practice before we can walk or talk smoothly; likewise we must go through a similar effort before fluent painting becomes possible. Boring paintings happen if we adopt techniques that do not arise from our individuality.

I do not mean that you or I should not study and learn from the great masters of technique. On the contrary. The more we know about ingenious ways to apply paint, the more power we will have in doing it in our own paintings. It makes good sense to acquire the methods of artists that we admire—the more the better—but they should always remain ancillary to our own personal fancies.

It is important for us to remember that the celebrated techniques—all of them—are simply artists' *solutions* to the problem of how best to use paint in order to produce their pictures. The more enduring ways become classics. The Flemish and Dutch schools, Impressionism, and the fluid Direct painting of many 19th century painters, are brilliant achievements that have influenced me deeply, and I look to them as standards. In no way, however, do I feel they are the ultimate way of painting. They simply represent unusually effective and highly-developed ways to stick paint on a surface.

ALL SUCCESSFUL TECHNIQUES ARE THE END RESULT OF A CLEAR VISION OF THE WORK TO BE CREATED. If I have a strong enough mental picture of what I wish to see on my canvas, that image will also be a picture of the technique required to paint it. Those images can come from anywhere. While I draw mostly upon myself for ideas, I am also fascinated by subjects that remind me of other artists' work. Sometimes a model's visage will evoke portraits by Serov, or Mancini (or my own). My ego is such that my usual motivation is not to imitate, but to paint what they missed seeing. (How's *that* for confidence?) Powerful impressions such as these help me form my own plans for pictures.

Also, the nature of a subject or the circumstances under which I must paint can almost dictate the technique I need. For example, a scene containing broad simple shapes will not suggest a picky broken color approach, but something with interesting small patterns will. If I'm out in the wind and rain and I'm hungry, I'm not going to sit around catching pneumonia trying to paint like Vermeer.

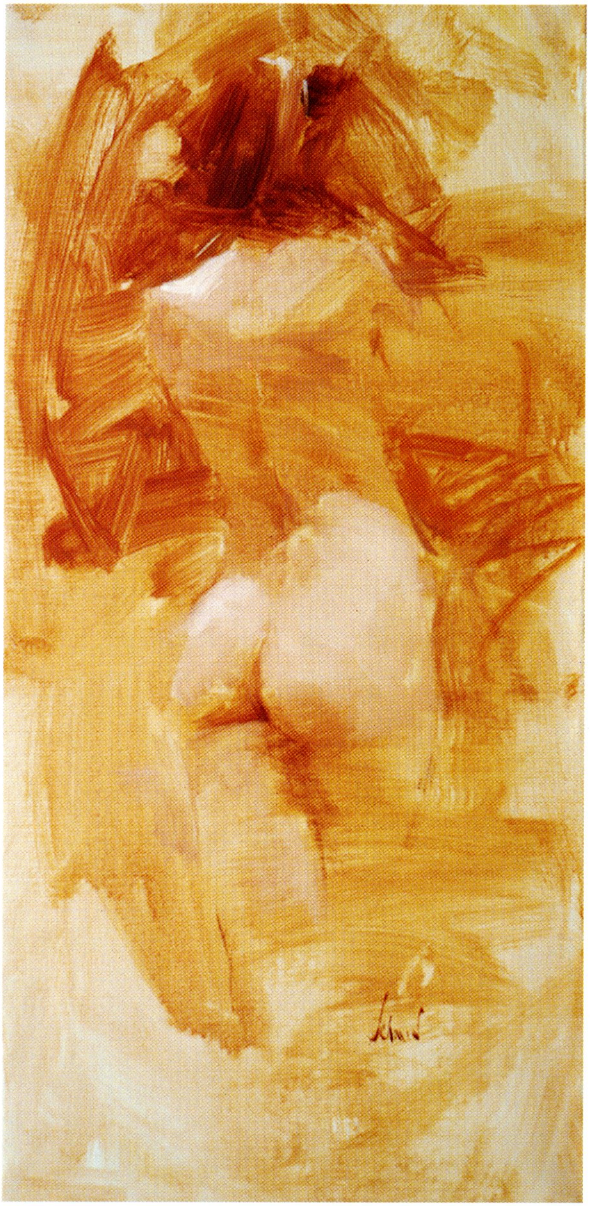
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1 *Techniques* are recognized or distinctive ways of working, as in Broken Color technique, Glazing technique, Egg tempera technique, Pollock drip technique, and the like.

2 *Style* (with a capital "S") refers to specific forms and periods of art—Renaissance, Baroque, Rococco, Romantic, etc. Style with a small "s" is your personal slant in depicting things.



"NUDE" Pastel 24″ × 17″



"NUDE" Oil Wash 21″ × 10″



I remember thinking as I was doing this portrait (in 1987), that it might have been the way John Singer Sargent painted. (What presumption!) Sargent departed nine years before I was born; therefore, I could not have known (not precisely) how he did it. No one knows, even though people might still be alive today who actually watched him paint. The best thing I can say now is that my painting only *looks* like his style—and his earliest student period at that. Actually, other paintings, such as those on pages 20, 50, 70, and 161, more nearly resemble his mature work.

The few words he left us, along with some descriptions by his family, students, and friends, are merely tantalizing hints about his procedures. Nevertheless, I feel now that I have reached a stage where I can correctly extrapolate things from his paintings (and the methods of other direct painters of his time), which I feel are true. I know without doubt that he was *very* careful, and probably did not paint rapidly; his surface brushwork only *looks* like he did it fast. I also know that he *constantly* compared his painting to his model, and that he placed his canvas (when he could) as close to his subject as possible so he could view the two side by side from a distance of probably 8 to 12 feet. He must have made judgments about the accuracy or inaccuracy of each brushstroke, and what to do next—from that same distance. Clearly, he must have squinted at his subject, but opened his eyes to paint. I know little about his paints or brushes or other materials—such things do not matter anyway because they have almost nothing to do with his technique.

"CROATIAN GIRL" Oil 21″ × 18″

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN TECHNIQUE

You were not born with an innate gift for style; you were just a cute little *tabula rasa* like the rest of us. You acquired personalized skills as you did everything else—by study, experimentation, and practice. Even Mozart had to *learn* how to play the piano before he could compose. Learned skill and craftsmanship are as vital a part of technique as knowing exactly what you want to paint and how you wish to paint it. At one time, the words *artist* and *craftsman* actually meant the same thing—an artist was first and foremost a skilled person. On the whole, I agree with that view. (Assuming, of course, an artistic sensitivity also.) Clearly, someone who understands tools will be more successful with them than one who doesn't. Skill and creativity operate as a feed-back system, each stimulating the other to higher levels. The more you already know, the better you will understand new things, and then you can do more, and know even more, and so on.

GOOD HABITS

Here are some of the things I have learned about working habits and having a professional attitude—the "guts" of technique.

1. **Don't be afraid of your paints and tools.** Be in charge. Whether you work with oils, watercolor, pastels, charcoal, acrylic, Conté, or all of these—study them! Experiment endlessly, see what they can do and what they can't. Master them rather than the reverse. Try everything you can think of to exhaust their possibilities and overcome their difficulties. Remember and use the things that produce results.

2. **Use the best available tools**—especially when it comes to your brushes. Sell your grandmother if necessary, but buy the most expensive brushes you can find. Good brushes hold their shape when they are wetted in water, so don't spend the grandmother money without soaking the brushes well to see what happens. (A flat oil bristle brush should have an edge like a carpenter's chisel.) Bring your own can of water if necessary. Brush manufacturers like to put something on the bristles so that they look well-pointed or chiseled while they are on display. Don't trust them. You can't tell good ones from cheap ones just by looking at them.

3. **Take care of your brushes.** Wash them lovingly in mild hand soap (never powders or anything with bleach in it) until you have a clean white lather, then rinse them well and shape them for drying. Sable brushes can be shaped with the fingers. I like to shape a flat bristle brush by folding a small piece of cardboard over the bristles and securing it with a clip (like putting curlers in hair only the "curler" is flat). This sounds like a lot of bother, but it's worth it.

My brushes are my little friends—slaves actually. They must be in a condition to perform for me. If the ferrules are choked with dried paint, they will lack the "spring" I need, and if they are not evenly-shaped at the point, I consider them useless. Working with bad brushes is like playing the piano with boxing gloves.

4. **Never skimp on paint.** Put enough on your palette for impasto painting and always have them arranged in the same order on your palette. Get into the habit of rinsing your brush before dipping into clean piles of pigment so that you avoid contaminating your pigments. Use a palette knife to mix large portions of paint. If you work in pastels, use the best, and have a large assortment. Return each to its properly ordered place as you work so you won't have to search when you need the same one again.



"CASCADE BARN" (Washington) Oil 8″ × 12″

This little sketch was done entirely with a palette knife. I had traveled to this site, in the Cascade Range east of Seattle, and forgotten to bring mineral spirits. With no way to clean my brushes, I resorted to using a knife, which could be cleaned with a swipe of a rag. Normally, I use a palette knife to merely supplement my brush painting or achieve special effects. Doing the whole thing with a knife was challenging, and the end result very surprising because, with only a knife to work with, I had to find new ways to manipulate my paint. Knife painting is definitely a learning experience, and well worth the effort.

5. **Keep your palette orderly** and clean it often as you work. Don't try to save leftover paint mixtures either. Glass palettes for the studio clean easily with a razor scraper and alcohol. Make sure your palette is large enough for generous mixing.

6. **A clean brush is essential for painting with clean color.** For rinsing them, I have two large containers of mineral spirits (or water when I work in gouache and watercolor). I discard my solvents frequently so that at least one container is always fresh. I have plenty of paper towels handy, and I buy the most absorbent ones available. They are more expensive, but they do a better job, and I need fewer of them.

7. **Have a stable easel,** one that is large enough and adjusts easily. In the studio this is usually not a problem. For outdoor painting, the French-style easels are convenient if you don't work too large, but they tend to blow over easily and their palettes are small. Wind is the big headache in landscape painting. Rain can be managed with a generous umbrella, but not when there is a gale blowing. I use a sturdy surveyor's tripod that I modified to accommodate a canvas. It has never been victim to the wind even with an umbrella attached to it.

8. **Cultivate as many working methods as you can** so that you can respond to the demands of painting different subjects. Don't expect that an effective way of painting a landscape will work as well for a child's portrait. Learn to paint thickly, thinly, loosely, tightly, quickly, slowly, and so on, according to the requirements and character of your subjects. Strive to expand your repertoire. For no other reason, work in different ways just for the satisfaction of confounding art critics.

9. **Do not consider your painting finished unless it is exactly what you want to see.** If you feel that you are not skilled enough to do that, take the time and trouble to learn what it is you need to know to do it.

THE PALETTE KNIFE

Learn to use it! A palette knife is an amazingly versatile instrument, and you can produce effects with it that are impossible with a brush alone. Have two or three of them from one inch to three inches long. Expensive Italian knives are the best. They should be elongated triangles, very flexible, with rounded, not sharply pointed tips. Take care that they do not get bent downward with use. They must be flat for control—and don't *ever* let paint dry on them!

A knife is customarily thought of as a miniature trowel for applying thick smooth-looking paint, also as a tool to mix pigment or scrape it from a canvas. It does all of that, of course, but far more. Perhaps its best function is in creating edges. When the clean flat surface of the knife is drawn across brush work, it produces a unique form of blending—one you cannot duplicate in any other way. Doing it right takes practice because it must be done in a single stroke.

Unusual edge effects also happen when the knife is used to carefully scrape away wet paint. I use short scraping motions for this with the knife held very lightly and wiped carefully between strokes. The sharp edge of the blade can be used to modify brushstrokes, or other knife strokes, or to apply razor thin lines of paint.

I give you one caution—when you are applying paint with a knife, usually only *one* edge of your stroke will be satisfactory (unless you are lucky). That edge will most likely be the point where your blade touches the canvas first. Typically, the remaining edges will have to be modified with subsequent strokes with either a brush or knife.

There is no limit to what can be done with a knife. The best way I know of to learn how to use it is to lock away your brushes for several weeks and paint only with a knife. I warn you that it will be extremely frustrating at first, but don't give up. The difficulty is normal. If you haven't used a knife before, you will feel like you are crippled—like a right-hander doing everything with the left hand or vice versa. However, it is worth every ounce of pain and effort. The ability to use a knife well is like having a whole new language.

Do not underestimate these points of craftsmanship. Never dismiss them as not having anything to do with creativity, because they do. **When you paint, everything counts.**



My aim in this brief (four hour) study was to concentrate on the model's expression, so I used very little showoff brushwork in her face, but I couldn't resist all that dry brush painting in her hair.

"SANDRA"
Oil 16″ × 20″

TECHNIQUE—PART TWO—WORKING FROM PHOTOS

CRUTCHES

As Bette Davis remarked—fasten your seat belts folks, this is going to be a bumpy ride! If you feel a little twinge of guilt at the word photography, you are not *alone*. There is something about working from photos that raises the hackles of the "pure" artist within all of us. Even those painters who freely acknowledge their dependence on photography do so with an undertone of apology.

Almost everyone does it. Even those who deny it have probably secretly given it a whirl. It was used by the Renaissance painters to refine their ideas on perspective, and there seems little doubt that Vermeer used some sort of projection device for his drawing. The 19th century Naturalist painters depended heavily on photos, and superstars such as Sargent, Sorolla, Zorn and others made free use of the camera.

Photography is now so pervasive that Commercial art and much of what passes for Fine art today could not exist without it. Painters, skilled and unskilled, are irresistibly drawn to the lure of photography, yet they are uncomfortable with it at the same time. Nevertheless, in spite of their qualms, I have yet to meet an artist hooked on photos who was willing to discard the crutch and paint exclusively from life instead.

WHY CALL IT A CRUTCH?

It is only a crutch when it is used as a substitute for skill or essential effort. Photos are a godsend for anyone who can't draw, or those who can, but are too lazy. In the same way that a calculator is used to bypass the tedium of arithmetic, the camera is used to replace freehand drawing. Drawing well requires serious ability and considerable effort; pressing a camera release does not. It is this single undeniable fact about the use of photos that makes the subject so touchy.

So what's wrong with that? After all, if I may paraphrase a very famous American artist (whom I admire), we don't drive around in horse-drawn buggies anymore, why not use a fast easy modern way to draw in the comfort of a studio? The answer is that there is nothing at all wrong with using photos if you are merely interested in producing a picture. However, this book is not about making pictures. It is about developing skill, *not* finding ways to bypass it.

To be fair, the horse and buggy analogy does make a modest point of a sort. The camera and the many other graphic aids are undeniably useful, and the reality of photography's ubiquity is with us to stay. So at least we should look at what it is, what it isn't, and how best to handle it without feeling as if we were a bunch of sleazy cheaters. Here are some of the pros and cons about using it.

THE PROS

1. Photography is a quick convenient way to record something to be painted later. It can also serve as a supplement to painting from life, as a reference for touch-up work, or as a record of detail for corrections. Photos are useful too for gathering ideas for paintings to be done from life, or as an informational tool used in the same way as a quick sketch.



"SKAGWAY TRAWLER" (Alaska) Oil 24″ × 36″

Skagway Trawler was done with the aid of a close-up photo I shot while cruising about this fog-bound Alaska bay in a leaky rubber dinghy. I also had done a color sketch made from a dock at a greater distance. My color study from life was invaluable in compensating for the inherent deficiencies in the photo—particularly in the subtle gradations of color temperature in the misty atmosphere surrounding the boat, and the grays in the water. With situations as sensitive as this, I find it essential to have already painted an identical scene from life.

2. Photos are often the only way we can have access to certain subjects. Even though it is a limited access, it is better than none at all. It allows us to capture things that are impossible to paint from life—things that move too fast or exist as very brief effects. Often we would like to paint certain things, but there is no vantage point from which to paint, or other circumstances make it impossible to set up our painting equipment. A camera brings those otherwise inaccessible subjects within our reach. Artists with special needs, the physically handicapped, the confined, could not experience certain kinds of painting at all without photography.

THE CONS

1. Cameras are recording devices, not *experiencing* devices. A photo is the product of a machine that simply makes an impassive visual record of whatever it is pointed at. Unlike us, it does not think or feel. No camera was ever terrified snapping a shot of an oncoming train, and no camera was ever in love with the person whose picture it took.

Cameras do not get emotionally involved, do not have attitudes, philosophies, or opinions, and they don't get angry when their pictures don't turn out. They are technically smart, but *life-dumb* instruments. A rock is perhaps more poetically sensitive.

2. Wonderful pictures can be painted from photos, but they will not be the same as working from the real thing. A photo cannot contain the countless other stimuli that you experience painting from life—the sound of wind and birds, the living presence of a model, and your own sweaty excitement in capturing what is happening. Never dismiss the powerful effect of your environment, your personal state, or the intimate reciprocity between yourself and your subject. Those things, combined with your skills literally *force* the way you paint. It is a dramatic human situation. Because of this, the results of working from life are, for better or worse, at least evidence of a *real* event. At best, a photo is a second-hand substitute for your actual experience, and you must supplement it with only your memory and guesswork as aids.

3. Cameras do not give a true technical picture of what you and I see (not yet, and they never will). They are marvels indeed, but they only record what they are designed to record, and that is both qualitatively and quantitatively different than what we humans see. Except for capturing detail, which they are good at (better than us), cameras are remarkably limited. The sensitivity of photographic film is trifling compared to our human sensitivity; its color and value latitude is only a tiny fraction of what our eye-mind team sees.

Above a certain lightness everything in a photo is washed-out white; below a given darkness it is all the same unidentifiable color (which is one reason why photos disappoint us). "Bracketing" helps (taking several different exposures of the same shot), but even then, we can never see the extremes of brightness or darkness in their true colors and values simultaneously. There is also the frustrating fact that no matter how sophisticated our equipment or photographic skill, we never know exactly what we will or will not capture at the moment we trip the shutter.



"YORKSHIRE CHICKENS" Oil 18″ × 36″

Chickens do not like to stand still to be painted. They simply don't understand Art or the needs of the artist, so I used photos, actually a series of photos, to execute this painting. Fortunately the day was overcast; the birds were all in the same soft cool light, and that made things easier. Continuity of light and its consequent temperature relationships throughout a painting are the key to working with multiple photos. I found that as long as I kept my lights and darks the same degree (respectively) of coolness or warmth, things would look like they all belonged together.

Working from video images (TV and computer) is all the rage now,[3] but in fact, TV pictures are just fancy versions of photos. They are more fun though because the pictures can be manipulated in entertaining ways. However, video recorders are restricted in their own way just as photographic cameras are. Their receptors have intrinsic limits, and the monitors used to view them are even less effective. Beyond a given value the screen goes all white, and there is no true black unless the TV set is switched off in a completely darkened room.

4. Paintings done from photos are easily spotted. At worst, they look like enlarged 35mm slides. At best, they usually appear to be very tightly detailed renderings.[4] A telltale giveaway is that the subject or an aspect of it could not possibly have been done from life. (It doesn't take a genius to see that a deer leaping in midair, with each hair on its body precisely rendered, could not have been posed.) Too much detail is also a giveaway because painting from life *alla prima* will not allow it. Other tip-offs are a characteristic lack of selectivity—painting *everything*, including the deficiencies in a photo (such as overexposure and a lack of color in the darks).

THE REALLY ***BIG*** SIN

You will know for certain that you have truly hit bottom the day you project a photo onto a canvas or paper and—dare I even say the word—*trace* it. I know that the very *thought* has probably never occurred to you, but if the temptation ever rears its ugly head, resist it to the death! Why? Because direct tracing is like cranking up a player piano and pretending that you are the one doing the playing. It is like throwing a TV dinner in the microwave and assuming you are a chef. It is painting by the numbers, but without the numbers. It is interesting how we delude ourselves—the human capacity for self-deception is amazing. You might dazzle a layman, for a while, even some of your fellow artists, but you cannot fool yourself entirely any more than you can hide from God. Of course, if you're painting to make money, it doesn't matter. In that case the goal is profit, not art, so anything goes, but I feel sorry for you.

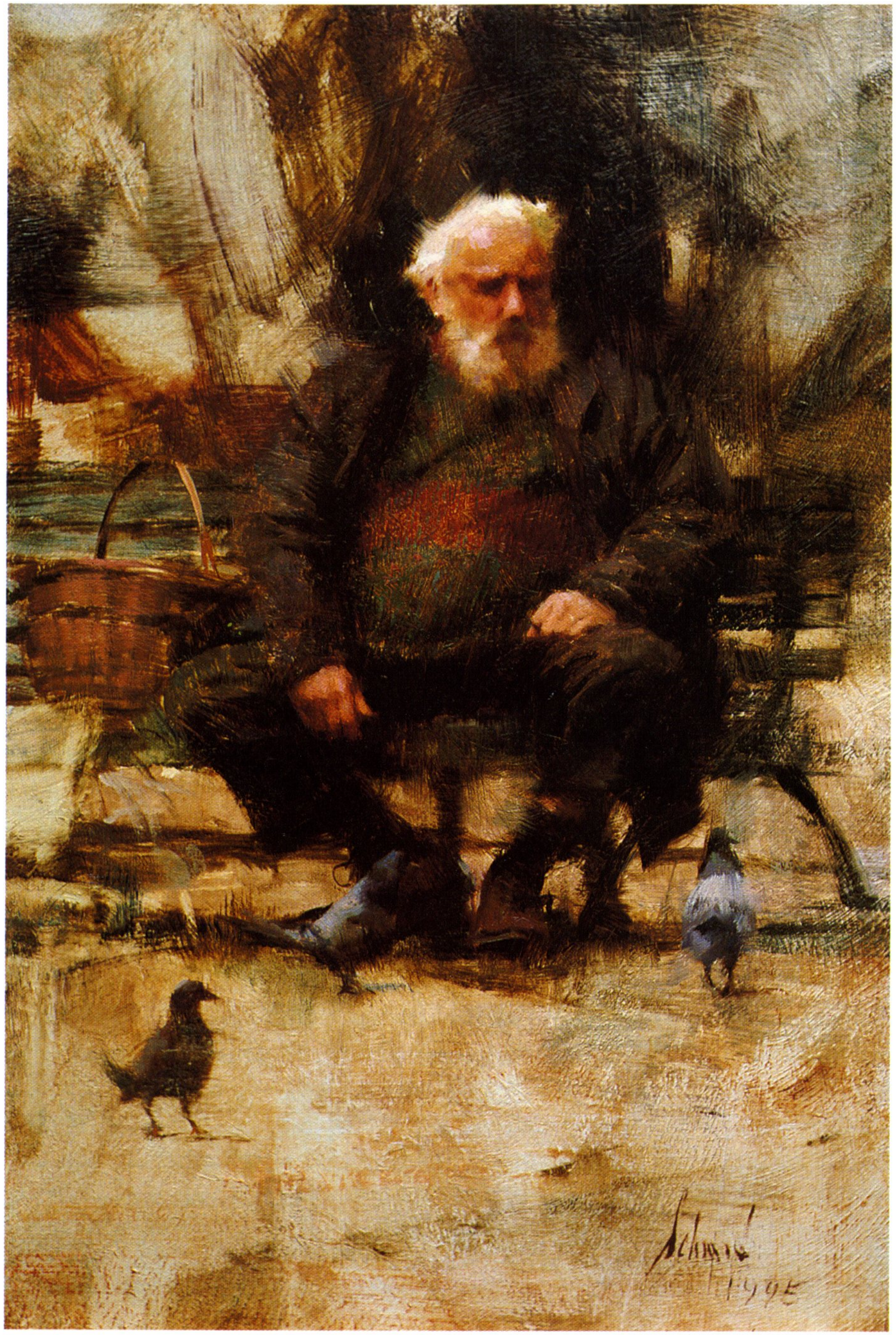
Second, if you do it too much, it is likely to destroy what drawing ability you do have. Tracing seems effortless compared to freehand drawing, and it can easily become a dependent habit. The *rendering* of a traced image, however, can be anything but effortless because of the tendency to try and preserve the lines.

Real drawing is a discipline that must be maintained by constant practice. It is like staying in physical shape. Knowing *how* to do it must be accompanied by actually *doing* it. Tracing to get the drawing reduces you to the level of a child playing with a coloring book, and it's not as much fun as it was when you were three years old.

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3 Apparently high-tech assuages some guilt by allowing artists to feel as if they are breaking new ground.

4 Many collectors prefer "photographic" highly detailed art, particularly wildlife art fans and others who collect for authentic renditions of specific subject matter. "Western" paintings in particular are popular (cowboys, Indians, the U.S. Cavalry), also aviation, military and war stuff, automobiles, old sailing ships, etc. This demand tends to encourage the use of photos because the market, however naive, is very lucrative. However, it has nothing whatsoever to do with Art.



The camera is perfect for capturing people in candid, non-posed, situations. This elderly gentleman in Madrid's Retiro Park (1995), for example, might have been self-conscious or unwilling to pose if I had asked him. Certainly, he would not have been as natural looking as he is here, nor would the pigeons. Fortunately, Nancy and I had done several studies from life there in the park, which made it relatively easy to do this one. For some reason, perhaps because of my experience, when I work from life, the color and light relationships of each situation are forever burned in my memory. I can look at painting I did when I was in my early twenties and still remember my color mixtures then as if I had just done them today.

"GOLD EARRING" (Madrid) Oil 12″ × 8″

When you finish a painting started as a tracing, there will be little sense of achievement, except perhaps for the patience required to color it. Tracing is degrading because you will have denied yourself the freedom to use your own powers of self-expression. **Is that really the way anyone should want to be an artist?**

HOW I USE PHOTOS

I use them in situations I outlined previously in describing the "pros." However, I painted exclusively from life for over 20 years before a physical disability limited my ability to carry equipment around for landscape painting. For awhile, a camera was the only means I had of reaching certain outdoor subjects. I know for certain that my considerable experience with *plein air* painting enabled me to avoid many of the problems of working with photos.

Two things are on my mind when I must use a photograph. First, I want my painting to look as if it were done from life. That is my highest priority. Second, I am always aware of how much better it would be if I *were* painting from life instead. With that in mind, here are some other points:

1. I regard a photograph as a tool—*only* a tool—not as a more convenient way to draw, and definitely not as a *primary* source of subject matter. I use photography as a supplement to, not a substitute for the real thing—I never do anything from a photo that I haven't previously encountered in painting from life. If I must use a photo, most often I first do a small painting from life in order to get the color, values, and edges of the actual subject. I then do a larger version in my studio using a photo as reference for drawing and detail. The larger painting is always worse, and I feel stupid.

2. I use larger format film—120 (60mm) instead of 35mm—because it provides far more information (3½ times more) when enlarged. The Hasselblad camera I use is cumbersome compared to 35mm cameras, but it is worth the trouble. When my subject is a person, I restrict the size of my depiction to no more than one third life-size, because no photo, regardless of size, will show sufficient color changes for a life-size rendering, and I will end up guessing at the color (faking it).

3. I work from slides projected into a darkened box rather than using prints because even the best prints are wholly inadequate in nearly all respects except drawing. While slides are somewhat better, they too present a problem—a color temperature aberration caused by the hot projection lamp. All slides, including those shot under cool light, will appear warmer in color, particularly in the lighter values. I know of no way around this predicament except to ignore the warming effect, and paint according to the color temperature relationship that I know from my experience *should* exist in the subject. I am always impressed by the many differences between my memories of a subject and a photo of it. (And my visual memory is good.) Viewing a photo is similar to listening to a tape recording of a conversation—the recording device is nonselective and indiscriminate—exactly the opposite of how I experience things. That is why I am only comfortable working from a photo if I have painted its equivalent from life.



Usually, I don't expect to be able to work from life in an interior such as this church in Italy (1968), but there were no worshipers, and a few lire to the Sacristan cleared me to paint quietly in a corner. Doing this allowed me to experience the real thing—the sometimes gloomy light of old village churches (they're the same everywhere), and the ancient textures of worn wood and stone and altar linens. All of this was very helpful when I returned to my studio and did larger paintings of other church interiors, including Saint Peter's in Rome and others in Florence and Siena.

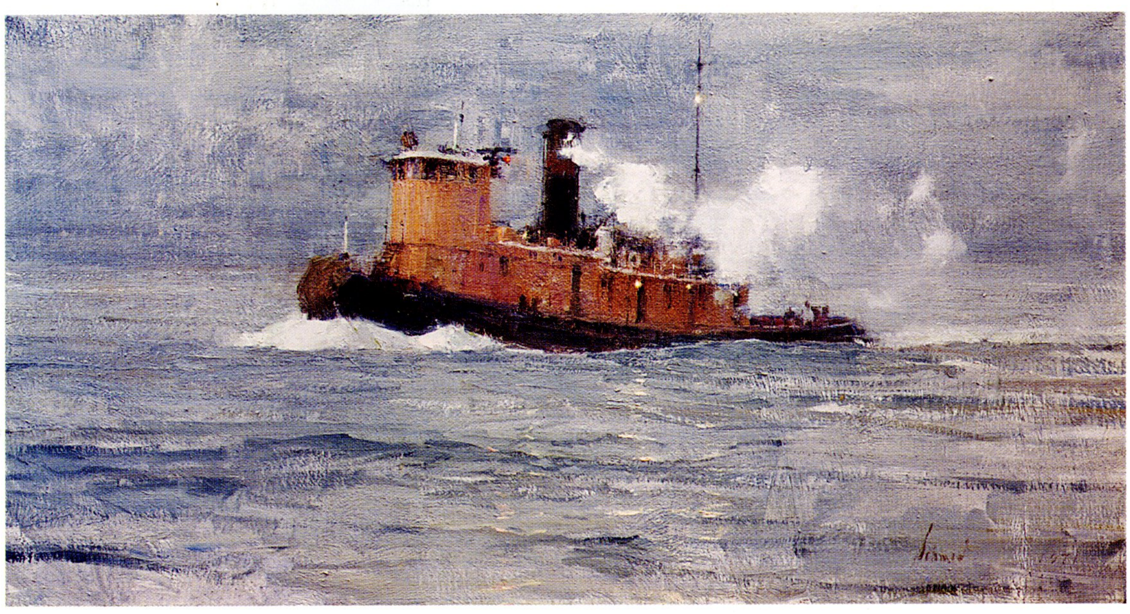
"SAN PANTALEO" (Italy)
Oil 16″ × 12″

4. To ensure that my picture will have an authentic *alla prima* look, I set the same time restrictions as if I were actually painting from life. That way I will be forced to use the technique, the brushwork, drawing style, and degree of detail that would normally result from working under time pressure. That takes a bit of self-discipline, but it yields a far more satisfying result (for me).

So be careful when you use a photo. Look at it closely for areas of washed out color and confusing detail. For example, photos taken in bright sunlight cannot capture true contrast and color simultaneously. Film yields the best color under moderate light conditions. When you are photographing, try to imagine the thing you are shooting as a painting. Before you trip the shutter, scan the subject for things in it, or things lacking, that might present later problems in painting. Also, be extravagant with film, bracket all of your shots, and shoot from many angles. Gather as much information as you can for a painting, but never use other peoples' photos. You need *your own* experience of the real thing to give an authentic look to your painting.

Use your photos as soon as possible after you take them so that your *memory* of the subject is fresh. Be especially aware of your edges when you paint. Make them softer than they appear in the photo, especially those on the periphery. Paint your colors brighter and dark values deeper to make up for the film's inherent weakness. Eliminate unnecessary detail whenever you can.

Lastly, if you are dependent upon the use of photos for your way of earning a living from art, try to counterbalance the negative effects they have on your basic skill by setting aside regular time for painting from life. Join a painting group or do it on your own to make sure that you maintain your "eye" for painting the real thing. It will enhance your work from photos immeasurably, and it's more interesting.



"BROOKLYN TUGBOAT"
Oil 16″ × 30″



"PROFILE" Oil 18″ × 24″

CHAPTER TEN—THE MAGIC

A PERSONAL VIEW

I have been a painter for my entire adult life. In all of that time I have never been able to ignore the wonders that are possible in painting. The astonishing thing to me is how certain individuals could even *conceive* of anything as beautiful as some of their works—or how you and I could have the capacity to respond to them.

I have pursued this question relentlessly over the years, and I am still consumed with the mystery of what makes such magic possible. In my younger days, I learned what many serious thinkers thought *about* Art, and for a while I even believed that I knew what it was. Inevitably it dawned on me that I could probably not rationally understand Art *itself*.

I know that perhaps it is best left a mystery lest it lose its flavor, but as the matter stands, I am not wholly resigned to being in the dark forever. There is something in me that wants to keep picking away at the question of Art, because it still amazes me that I cannot clearly define this thing that has so dominated my life. To me, conundrums like this are like windmills were to Don Quixote. So, though I don't expect to nail it very soon, the question of Art remains wonderfully seductive. It is firmly bound to my identity, my values, my relationships with others, and my idea of what the world is.

While I am painting, however, such theoretical ideas rarely surface. I never wonder if my work is important (whatever that means), or if I should be better occupied. Any doubts I may have about the significance of what I am doing are little more than trivial irritations. Marvelous speculations sometimes come rushing to the surface during my sweaty efforts at creation, but they are never about aesthetics or the nature of Art.

Instead, my painting draws me into the thing that captivates me. Sometimes when concentration is intense, my canvas seems to take on an irresistible momentum, unfolding almost as if it had a life of its own, and I become lost in the spectacle of what is occurring. Those are heady moments indeed, times to be savored. They are always a dramatic reminder that skill is only one of the prerequisites—part of the setup to unleash a poetic act—and my painting, with all of its involvement and complication, seems merely a *record* of the event.

Of course, there is more to this business than what happens during painting. In my student days I was introduced to the ideas of Robert Henri, perhaps the most revered and influential of American painters. In *THE ART SPIRIT*[1] he made one point over and over again—that Art can be a powerful voice for *anything*, and that artists should be the people who keep track of the unnoticed adventure underlying the routine of daily life. He urged us toward the Socratic maxim *Know Thyself* as the starting point. Henri believed that Art was the means to jolt ourselves and others awake to the wonder of being alive in this stupendous universe. Over and over he pleads with us to seek technical excellence so that we may give compelling expression to our thoughts.

Time has not diminished my fascination with his ideas nor those of other heroes of my youth: Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, and others. Their collective philosophy flashed as a thrilling verification of the direction in Art that I craved, and though it may sound naive for a man of my age, I still respond to those ideas.

1 *THE ART SPIRIT*—Robert Henri, Compiled by Margery Ryerson. Harper & Row.



"NANCY IN SHERWOOD FOREST"
Gouache 13″ × 10″

SUBJECT MATTER

Many people gravitate toward Art because it is an arena of great freedom—every human activity imaginable is now presented as Art today—but no creative effort can endure unless it touches us in a way we cannot forget. If you wish to do that with your paintings, you must do anything and everything necessary to paint them well. Awareness and deep response are the beginning of any poetic act, but they are common human experiences, not exclusively artistic, and everyone has them. What sets you apart from the rest of humanity is your ability to give visual form to an idea—the skill to transform it into something more than merely the insight or perception alone. (As Mae West put it: "It ain't what you say, it's how you say it.") Art is the thing that happens in the process of this unique transformation. You must be able to grab your viewer's attention and hold it while you get your message across.

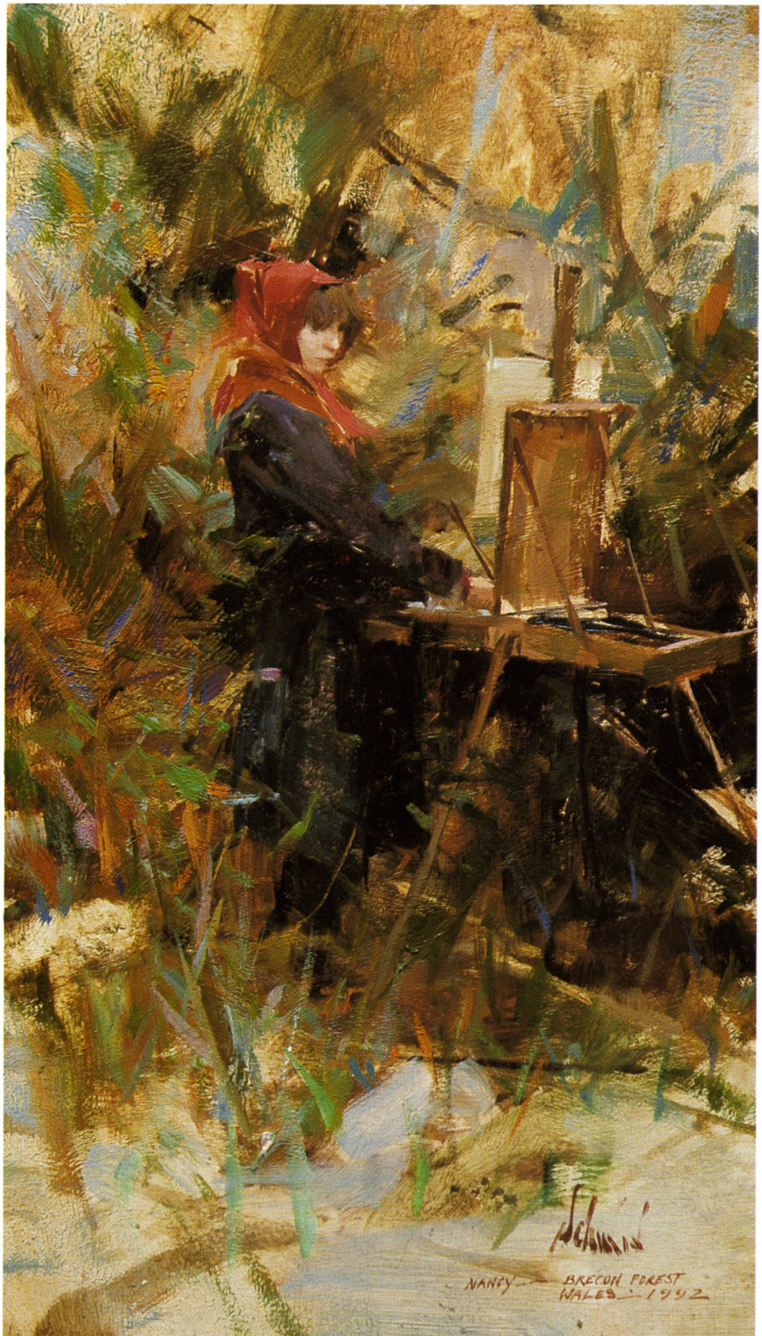
If what you choose to paint comes from your heart, and you are skillful enough, it will resonate somehow within someone else. It is absurd to imagine that the magnitude of a work is somehow connected to the accepted importance of its subject (or the artist). The portrait Velasquez did of his manservant surpasses those he did of the Pope or the King of Spain. Degas found his vision in simple ballet students, not prima ballerinas. Monet caught it with lily pads and hay; Lautrec saw angels in prostitutes; Vermeer painted the corner of his room. Rembrandt dignified humanity by painting his own worn face; Bach offered us his beautiful abiding love of God, and uncountable thousands of completely anonymous artists gave us their workaday craftsmanship—things that are now the treasures of antiquity.

Always remember that everything, dear friend, is a miracle, and it is everywhere. Therefore, nothing is out of bounds as subject matter, even the most negative of things. That is why the face masks of Tragedy and Comedy are symbols of Drama, and why Poetry and Music are so bittersweet. The grandest and simplest things contain worlds within worlds. Seeing them is a matter of the right point of view, and your painter's eye is a special portal to such sights.

When choosing your subjects, never worry about greatness or significance or your place in history. Let your subject come from within you and be a simple act of sharing. In a sense, every work you do is a self-portrait because your paintings always reveal more about you than about your subject. *Your* experience of something, *not the something itself,* is the true underlying subject of every work you do. Ultimately, that is how your work, or that of any other artist, will be judged.

YOU

You are the sum of your choices. Your job then is to make sure that your ideas about what to paint are not wholly based upon either the acceptable or the taboo, but arise instead from what honestly fascinates and stirs you. You may feel vulnerable, but I see no way around that. I assure you it is OK to feel vulnerable—it is, after all, the human condition. In any case, your thoughts (and mine) are just as valid as anyone elses. Even though you share countless similarities with others, you are unique. No one has your mind or your feelings. They do not notice what you notice, and do not have *precisely* the same sensitivities or fears. No one has the same idea of God as you. No one longs to embrace life or ponders death and beyond as you do. No one is human in the same exact way as you are. Once you understand this, your task is to get in touch with yourself. Find out what moves you, what you believe in, what you truly understand about life, who you are, and what this great experience of being alive means to you. Then put it in your paintings.



"BRECON FOREST" (Wales)
Oil 18″ × 10″

Somewhere within all of us there is a wordless center, a part of us that hopes to be immortal in some way, a part that has remained unchanged since we were children, the source of our strength and compassion. This faint confluence of the tangible and the spiritual is where Art comes from. It has no known limits, and once you tap into it you will realize what truly rich choices you have. May each painting you do from that sacred place include an expression of gratitude for the extraordinary privilege of being an artist.



"NAN"
Conté 15″ × 15″